

**COGNITIVE IDOLATRY AND THE TRINITY
IN PAUL K. MOSER'S PHILOSOPHY**

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the
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by

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Christian philosopher Paul K. Moser develops an account of human inquiry on which truth-seekers can do no better than to seek out the best available explanation of their perspective-bound nonconceptual experiences, using categories and interpretive commitments that vary according to their purposes as inquirers. When inquiry concerns a God who is worthy of worship, Moser argues that inquiry must conform to God's purposes in being known. These purposes include establishing fellowship with humans and between humans according to God's character of perfect love. The perspectival evidence needing theological explanation, for such a God, will consist of God's self-manifestation through I-Thou encounter. To receive such evidence, inquirers must conform to an ethics for inquiry that enables God to self-manifest and inquirers to receive that self-manifestation. Refusal to inquire about God on God's terms amounts to cognitive idolatry. As such, theological belief is justified for a person inasmuch as it best explains their experience of

God's self-manifestation using categories and interpretive commitments that comport with God's purposes in being known.

If we apply Moser's theological epistemology to inquiry about the Trinity, we must require that our construal of the Trinity account for God's self-manifestation in experience. It must therefore incorporate some notion of selfhood in the Trinity, where selfhood means being capable of I-Thou encounter. The evidence needing explanation consists of the Christian experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus. That is, a justifiable account of the Trinity must best explain why it is that Christians receive the Holy Spirit as conveying the personal presence of the exalted Jesus yet also perceive that the human Jesus is a co-recipient of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of his Father. Even so, no account of the Trinity serves God's purposes in being known if divorced from the inquirer's own experience of God. This pneumatic approach to the Trinity attends to God's purposes in being known by God's Son and Spirit. It represents an experiential approach to the doctrine of the Trinity and theology distinct from various biblical or traditional approaches.

To Amber, Miles, Lucy, and Jane

“I own I tax you, and I am sorry, but it has taxed me more.”

Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Theology is bankrupt,” John Oman writes, “the moment there is any suspicion that it seeks something else than truth.” Even so, “every kind of reality has its own kind of testimony,” and “truth is concerned purely with the witness of any kind of reality to itself.”¹ How then should truth-seekers address the Christian doctrine of the Trinity? As theology, the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to answer questions about God. It may be, however, that God has questions for truth-seekers. It may be that God has purposes in being known. Inquiry about the Trinity, if it be truth-seeking inquiry, must then proceed in light of God’s purposes in being known.

Christian philosopher Paul K. Moser examines and expounds upon the role that such purposes would play in human knowledge of God. This thesis examines theological inquiry about the Trinity in light of Moser’s philosophy. It argues that, in keeping with Moser’s approach to knowledge of God, the doctrine of the Trinity ought to explain a person’s experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus using categories that comport with God’s purposes in being known. That is, when an account of the Trinity neglects God’s self-manifestation in experience or uses categories that obscure it, then that account encourages cognitive idolatry.

¹ John Oman, “Method in Theology,” *The Expositor* 26 (1923): 82.

God's Purposes in Being Known and Cognitive Idolatry

Paul Moser is a Christian philosopher who specializes in the theory of knowledge and philosophy of religion. Born in Bismarck, North Dakota in 1957, Moser obtained a PhD in philosophy in 1982 at Vanderbilt University. Moser began teaching at Loyola University, Chicago in 1983 and continues to teach there today. He served as the chairperson of his philosophy department from 1997 to 2012 and as editor of *American Philosophical Quarterly* from 2007 to 2013. Moser's work in the theory of knowledge and philosophy of religion converge in what he calls "Gethsemane epistemology." He writes,

Philosophers have long looked for an Archimedean point to perceive the world aright and then act accordingly. The best kept secret is that Gethsemane is that Archimedean point whereby one can confront God directly, with due human receptivity. This is a "secret" mainly for volitional rather than intellectual reasons, because many humans are *unwilling* to go to Gethsemane and experience, obediently, the powerful evidence of God's reality. We should expect, however, that God intervenes only *as God* and therefore only on the divine end of a Gethsemane interaction.²

On Moser's account, knowledge of God is only available where suitable evidence may be found. If one seeks knowledge of a God of righteous love, however, the only suitable evidence will comport with God's character and purposes in being known. A God of righteous love would strive to align the wills of human inquirers with his own righteous will, for their own good. God would therefore provide the needed evidence for knowledge of God only where and when that evidence helps God's redemptive cause. Indeed, Moser insists, the needed evidence involves the self-manifestation of God's righteous character. Such evidence would only benefit those who ultimately receive it, that is, those who

² Paul K. Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology: Volitional and Evidential," *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 2 (2012): 268, emphasis original.

ultimately cooperate with God and are willingly transformed by God to manifest God's righteous character. Therefore, knowledge of God is available in Gethsemane, where Jesus is our cognitive exemplar and guide concerning knowledge of God. His example of making God's will his own illustrates that God is known on God's terms, namely on the basis of God's self-manifestation to those who submit their will to his righteous will. Knowledge of God, like evidence for God, is therefore *volitionally* sensitive. It depends on both human and divine purposes. This is the essence of Gethsemane epistemology.³

Moser traces his Gethsemane epistemology back to the New Testament, in particular to Jesus and Paul. He also claims that prior to the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Peter Taylor Forsyth, John Oman, Martin Buber, Herbert H. Farmer, and Emil Brunner, "modern philosophers and theologians had widely overlooked the centrality of divine-human interpersonal interaction in direct firsthand human knowledge of divine revelation."⁴ Moser contributes to this corrective tradition by introducing his notion of *purposively available authoritative evidence*. Namely, Moser insists that the evidence needed for knowledge of God is a gift given according to God's authoritative purposes in being known. These purposes are redemptive. They involve aligning the will of the human knower with the authoritative will of God. As such, human knowledge of God ceases when divorced from personal encounter with God on God's terms.

³ Moser develops this account in the following four monographs: *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (2008; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); *The God Relationship: Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 244-245.

Moser's work provokes discussion amongst Christian and skeptical philosophers alike. Doug Geivett praises Moser's program as "a biblically and theologically grounded epistemology of religious belief that does not beg questions in response to religious skeptics."⁵ Ronney Mourad, in contrast, characterizes Moser's writing as confrontational. He claims that Moser "issues a jeremiad against the cognitive idolatry of skeptical epistemologists of religion" and that he writes with a "homiletic tone" issuing "a philosophically sophisticated altar call."⁶ This invitation, however, is not limited to skeptics. Moser challenges Christians concerning the foundations of their faith with equal vigour. Geivett warns that some Christians who read Moser "may wonder whether, if the approach developed here is correct, they actually know God."⁷ Moser's Gethsemane epistemology is therefore a double-edged sword. It challenges the unwarranted insouciance of Christians and religious skeptics alike concerning their foundations for knowledge of God. Moser writes, "skeptics couldn't plausibly accuse me of just preaching to the choir, although even the choir could use some good preaching on occasion."⁸

Preaching to both skeptics and the choir, Moser introduces a notion of *cognitive idolatry* to account for the common practice of refusing to allow God to decide how we shall come to know God.⁹ When we refuse to allow God to be Lord of how we come to

⁵ R. Douglas Geivett, review of *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, by Paul K. Moser, *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 2 (2011): 479.

⁶ Ronney B. Mourad, review of *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, by Paul K. Moser, *Journal of Religion* 89, no. 4 (2009): 609-610.

⁷ Geivett, review of *The Elusive God*, 476.

⁸ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101ff.

know God, we refuse to know God in Gethsemane. Namely, we refuse to know God as willing recipients of God's self-manifestation of his righteous character. Cognitive idolatry is as simple as seeking knowledge of God while postponing God's personal challenge to our human will. Those who seek knowledge of God outside of Gethsemane seek it, in various ways, in vain. Accordingly, the manner in which we seek knowledge of God is crucial, making the difference between knowing God and self-deception.

Paul Moser and the Natural Theologians

Paul Moser's Gethsemane epistemology often provokes a strong response from Christian philosophers on account of his hostility toward the project of natural theology in particular and intellectualism in general. By natural theology, Moser means arguments that "seek to establish, or at least confirm God's existence on the basis of *natural* sources of human knowledge, without an appeal to any special revelation from God."¹⁰ While many Christian philosophers regard natural theology as a helpful program worthy of their attention, Moser depicts it as a dispensable and perhaps dangerous distraction from the evidence a righteous God would actually provide. By definition, natural theology neglects God's authoritative call to human inquirers. Any argument that includes "a humanly experienced divine call," Moser notes, "will move beyond natural theology proper to *supernatural* theology."¹¹ Natural theology therefore brackets the one thing needful in

¹⁰ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 152, emphasis original. See 142-184 for his detailed criticism of natural theology.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155, emphasis original.

human inquiry. It cannot conclude that a righteous God of perfect love exists, having procedurally ignored the characteristic evidence of God's self-manifestation.

By intellectualism, Paul Moser means the view that we should approach the question of whether God exists by thinking hard about our *current* evidence.¹² Those who subscribe to intellectualism, theists and atheists alike, neglect potentially *available* evidence. Whether one seeks further evidence is a matter of the will. When the needed evidence is available yet not in hand, "mere thinking would not settle the question of God's existence for one, because one would need to exercise one's will in pursuing the relevant evidence."¹³ Intellectualism is ill-advised for truth-seekers when God self-manifests to those who willingly seek him, rather than to those who reflect hardest upon an evidence base that lacks God's authoritative call. "Humans in need of redemption should not expect to know a redemptive God on the cheap, as if no volitional challenge is needed."¹⁴ Natural theology practices intellectualism by merely reflecting on evidence *in hand* rather than accounting for, seeking out, or otherwise recommending God's purposefully *available* self-manifestation as the crucial evidence for a God of righteous love.

Moser's critics generally grant him the importance of God's self-manifestation while attempting to salvage some meaningful, albeit secondary, role for natural theology. For instance, Kathryn Waidler agrees "wholeheartedly with what Moser affirms, that evidence for God is volitional and thus requires a willingness to submit one's own will to

¹² Moser, *The God Relationship*, 145.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

God's." Yet she insists that natural theology is still useful, "if only to clear intellectual obstacles to belief in a morally perfect intentional agent."¹⁵ Charles Taliaferro likewise insists that religious experience is only regarded as veridical within a worldview and natural theology prepares one to interpret a Gethsemane experience.¹⁶ Harold Netland suggests that God may reveal himself in part through the arguments of natural theology, in addition to Moser's notion of self-manifestation.¹⁷ John Haldane complains that Moser neglects the traditional role of natural theology as a preamble "to the reception of revelation."¹⁸ Richard Davis and W. Paul Franks argue that natural theology need not establish that a God of righteous love exists to be useful. Natural theology merely needs to show skeptics the intellectual price they pay to avoid its minimally theistic conclusions.¹⁹ Paul Macdonald claims that natural theology "emphasizes God's epistemic *distinction* from the realm of human concepts and experience," and thereby helps to avoid the knowledge of God being simply an "*expression* of human concepts and experience."²⁰ He further suggests that when skeptics are closed to God's self-manifestation, natural theology may still influence them.

¹⁵ Kathryn D. Waidler, "Volitional Evidence for God," *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 2 (2012): 276.

¹⁶ Charles Taliaferro, "The Evidence for Paul Moser," *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 2 (2012): 288.

¹⁷ Harold Netland, "If 'Personifying Evidence' is the Answer, What is the Question? A Response to Paul Moser," *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 2 (2012): 296.

¹⁸ John Haldane, review of *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, by Paul K. Moser, *European Theological Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 155.

¹⁹ Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, "What Place, Then, for Rational Apologetics?," in *Loving God With Your Mind: Essays in Honor of J.P. Moreland*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 129–142.

²⁰ Paul A Macdonald Jr, review of *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, by Paul K. Moser, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 1 (2009): 137-138, emphasis original.

Paul Moser nevertheless insists that natural theology is a dangerous distraction since “it leaves us in an optional intellectual sideshow, without pointing us to the powerfully experienced Good News characteristic of the God worthy of worship.” Moser warns that “postponing the Good News message for the sake of supposed philosophical preliminaries often leaves philosophers languishing indefinitely in such preliminaries.” In any case, natural theology is in no sense *necessary* preparation for encounter with God in experience. The experience of God’s self-manifestation can *itself* challenge faulty worldviews as needed, without help from natural theology. Furthermore, natural theology is not *sufficient* for knowledge of God, as most of his critics grant. As such, Moser insists that “God does not have to postpone Gethsemane and its needed benefits until the philosophical theologians weigh in.”²¹ The Good News is better off, all things considered, without help from natural theology.

Timothy McGrew offers a different sort of critique. He questions the value of Moser’s account of religious experience relative to the public evidence of natural theology. He rightly discerns that Moser “is trying to bring about a reorientation of the notion of evidence itself,” at least in relation to “avenues of knowledge that can arise through personal experience.” Like most critics, McGrew objects that Moser’s Gethsemane epistemology excludes natural theology. Unlike most critics, he objects to Moser’s claim that the experience he describes is normative for Christians. McGrew then discloses that “I have little to say about religious experiences that swing free of the more traditional kinds of evidence. I am not personally subject to such experiences,” and indeed, “to the

²¹ Paul K. Moser, “Natural Theology and the Evidence for God: Reply to Harold Netland, Charles Taliaferro, and Kate Waidler,” *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 2 (2012): 307, 311, 309.

extent that my circle of acquaintances is representative, many serious self-professing Christians do not have such experiences.” The experience upon which Moser insists ought not to be normative, even if it is extraordinary. McGrew concludes that “there is no particular reason for God to disclose himself in an extraordinary and private way to those for whom the public evidence is available and sufficient.”²²

Moser replies to McGrew by insisting that natural theology is not sufficient for knowledge of a God of righteous love. He points to the transformative witness of the Holy Spirit in Romans as foundational evidence. This witness “brings evidence of God’s reality and moral character, in divine love being ‘poured into’ the hearts of those receptive to God.” Accordingly, “public evidence will have to accommodate the foundational role of this evidence.”²³ Moser then responds to McGrew’s rejection of religious experience as normative in epistemology, where the experience consists of God’s self-manifestation via the transformative witness of the Holy Spirit.

He [McGrew] remarks: “I am not personally subject to such experiences” (213). This is a very serious matter for a Christian, because, as Paul indicates, it corresponds to whether one is led by God’s Spirit. Many people lack the experience in question, but Christian hope and faith in God depend on such experiences according to the apostle Paul.²⁴

²² Timothy McGrew, “Response from the Convergence Model,” in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 213-214.

²³ Paul K. Moser, “A Rejoinder,” in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 224.

²⁴ Ibid.

Even so, Moser's critics challenge him to clarify his notion of religious experience, divine self-manifestation, and the content that they convey.²⁵ This is particularly needed since Moser rejects the value of spectacular, numinous, or mystical religious experience.²⁶

Another line of criticism concerns Moser's conceptual foundations. Moser's Gethsemane epistemology depends on his notion of God as worthy of worship, or as we have put it, God as a God of righteous love. Moser typically begins his deliberations by clarifying his use of the term God:

Here and throughout we'll use the overused term "God" as a maximally honorific *title* that connotes an authoritative and morally perfect being who is inherently worthy of worship as wholehearted adoration, love, and trust, even if God doesn't actually exist. This title, in keeping with titles generally, is intelligible even if it lacks a titleholder.²⁷

This preliminary step is crucial in Moser's work. It allows him to engage religious skeptics concerning what God, so understood, *would* do if the title God happened to have a title-bearer. Dialogue with skeptics cannot proceed if one begs their question concerning whether God exists. Furthermore, this preliminary step directly guides Moser's expectations for God and the sort of evidence that God would provide. By drawing out the analytic features of his notion of the title "God," Moser shows that being God requires moral perfection, including perfect enemy-love. Without moral perfection, God would not be fully trustworthy and hence unworthy of worship. A being who fails to love others, Moser insists, thereby exhibits a character unbecoming the title "God." "Universal

²⁵ Macdonald, review of *The Elusive God*, 137.

²⁶ James G. Murphy, review of *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, by Paul K. Moser, *Milltown Studies* 63 (2009): 124-125.

²⁷ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 1, emphasis original.

enemy-love is, we may say, a litmus test (as a logically necessary condition) for one's being God."²⁸

Peter Forrest recognizes that Moser rejects natural theology on account of his notion of God and his expectations for God associated with that notion. Forrest thus recommends caution concerning Moser's conclusions since they depend upon "detailed hypotheses about the divine intentions."²⁹ Kathryn Waidler likewise objects to Moser's conclusions given that some Christians understand worthiness of worship differently, e.g., worthiness of worship on account of sovereignty or omnipotence rather than moral perfection.³⁰ Harold Netland objects that Moser's notion of worthiness of worship fails to be one that "all reasonable persons should accept."³¹ This line of criticism rightly identifies the conceptual foundations of Moser's debate with natural theologians. To sum up, natural theologians often reply to Moser by defending natural theology as complementary to human experience of God, by criticizing his account of religious experience as non-normative or unclear, or by criticizing his foundational notion of God.

Paul Moser and Fideism

Some critics label Moser a fideist on account of his rejection of natural theology. Broadly construed, fideism is the view that "faith is in some sense independent of, if not

²⁸ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 19.

²⁹ Peter Forrest, review of *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined*, by Paul K. Moser, *Philosophical Review* 121, no. 4 (2012): 624.

³⁰ Waidler, "Volitional Evidence for God," 278-279.

³¹ Netland, "If 'Personifying Evidence' is the Answer, What is the Question?," 300-301.

outright adversarial toward, reason.”³² John Bishop observes that Moser dismisses a great deal of evidence potentially relevant to belief in God, particularly the evidence suited to natural theology. However, Bishop also acknowledges that Moser rejects “*irrationalist* fideism (that approves commitment to religious truth-claims contrary to the weight of one’s available evidence) and *arationalist* fideism (that approves religious commitment independently of epistemic concern).”³³ Yet Bishop thinks Moser succumbs to a *suprarationalist* fideism, namely that he divorces belief in God from all manner of rationalist forms of evidence including the evidence employed by natural theology. Bishop’s characterization doesn’t account for the fact that fideism *commends* belief without evidence. Moser, however, does not commend belief in God apart from the evidence of God’s self-manifestation.

Moser defines fideism as “the view that belief in God does not depend for its acceptability on well-grounded, or trustworthy, supporting evidence.” Fideism is not the only alternative to natural theology, although it remains popular amongst those who have “latched onto” Kierkegaard’s “language of a ‘leap’ of faith, and have suggested that faith in God cannot have supporting evidence.” Against fideism, Moser insists that we understand faith as *self-entrustment* to God. Such faith requires evidence, or a truth indicator, so that faith is “a response to an experienced intervention rather than a blind leap.” Without evidence for faith as self-entrustment, none can commend their faith in a trustworthy

³² Richard Amesbury, “Fideism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016), accessed February 14, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/fideism/>.

³³ John Bishop, review of *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, by Paul K. Moser, *Religious Studies* 45, no. 4 (2009): 509, emphasis original.

manner. Faith without truth indicators, namely faith without evidence, “is either necessarily false (if it is contradictory) or cognitively arbitrary (if it is lacking in a cognitive ground).” In contrast, those whose faith rests upon evidence provided by God in experience can commend that faith to themselves and others. They may even craft an argument relating their evidence to their justified belief. “Faith in God,” Moser insists, “can be at least as cognitively good, well-founded, and trustworthy as one’s trusting in one’s best friend, and therefore need not be a cognitive embarrassment or shortcoming at all.”³⁴

K. Scott Oliphint attempts to qualify Moser’s appeal to experiential evidence, writing that “any experiential self-manifestation of God will necessarily have its ground in God’s revelation,” namely in the Bible.³⁵ Moser replies to this suggestion by insisting that “the self-manifestation of God *is* a key feature of God’s revelation; it does not have or need a ‘ground’ in God’s revelation.”³⁶ Indeed, “as the Bible teaches, God swears by himself for God’s authenticity.” Oliphint, in contrast, insists that Protestants confess that “Holy Scripture must be self-attesting in its authority.”³⁷

Moser criticizes Oliphint for treating the Bible as an unshakable starting point for inquiry. At least concerning which ancient books belong in the Bible, none can appeal to

³⁴ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 88, 100, 110, 120, 140, 110.

³⁵ K. Scott Oliphint, “Response from the Covenant Model,” in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 212.

³⁶ Moser, “A Rejoinder,” 212.

³⁷ K. Scott Oliphint, “A Rejoinder,” in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 119.

the Bible without begging the question under consideration. “Many inquirers want to know why these books, and not other books, belong in the Bible, and for this a standard other than the Bible is needed.” Appeal to any particular authority as one’s unshakable starting point is bound to neglect the legitimate concerns of outsiders. Moser accordingly criticizes the presuppositional approach to theology and apologetics espoused by Oliphint for “seeming to be authoritarian and dogmatic in an evidential arbitrary manner.” Moser recommends that we instead “relate to doxastic outsiders (people with beliefs different from ours) in a way that is free of circularity or question begging.”³⁸

Concerning the Bible, Moser recommends that we distinguish “(a) its endorsed *truths about God*, that is, its theology, and (b) its reported unique *actions of God in human experience*.”³⁹ Rather than beginning with endorsed truths about God, we ought to begin with the experience of God reported by witnesses, since their experience serves as the evidential foundation for their teaching. Furthermore, truth-seekers today can share in the experience that biblical witnesses report. We ought to believe on the basis of such evidence rather than simply adopting biblical beliefs in an evidentially arbitrary manner. The Bible itself is evidence for the views and experiences of its authors, not for our own views and experiences today. Only when we share the experiences of biblical authors should we adopt their views, and then only inasmuch as their views best explain our shared experience. Of his own work, Moser writes, “I use Biblical passages when they offer

³⁸ Paul K. Moser, “Response from the Conformation Model,” in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 112-113.

³⁹ Ibid., 114, emphasis original.

explanatory benefits, without assuming the infallibility, inerrancy, or authority of the Bible as a whole.”⁴⁰ Therefore, Moser insists upon foundational experiential evidence of God’s self-manifestation in dialogue with fideists and natural theologians alike.

Paul Moser and the Doctrine of the Trinity

K. Scott Oliphint appeals to Trinitarian doctrinal considerations at multiple points in his response to Paul Moser’s work.⁴¹ Moser, for his part, speaks freely of Jesus, his Father, and the Holy Spirit but never makes explicit appeal to any traditional doctrine of the Trinity. The contrast between the two writers deserves closer examination. Indeed, this project examines the implications of Moser’s Gethsemane epistemology for Trinitarian theology. Moser offers a robust alternative foundation for theology in dialogue with skepticism, natural theology, and fideism. However, the implications of Gethsemane epistemology for Trinitarian theology seem, at present, largely unexplored.

Moser’s Gethsemane epistemology characteristically begins with his notion of God as worthy of worship. This starting point, Moser notes, does not depend on the authority of Christian theology, far less Trinitarian theology, but rather upon a conceptual foundation.⁴² Moser’s concept of God is like a hypothesis to be tested in experience. When suitably analyzed, it yields conceptually necessary expectations for such a God. These in turn yield conceptually necessary expectations for the sort of evidence that such a God would provide, namely the evidence of redemptive self-manifestation at times and places of God’s

⁴⁰ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 8.

⁴¹ Oliphint, “Response from the Covenant Model,” 207, 212.

⁴² Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology,” 265-266.

choosing, chosen for our good. Where might we find such a God? Who could qualify? The list of potential divine title-holders is short indeed. The deist god fails to qualify on account of neglecting others. Polytheism fares little better, struggling to recommend “even *one* being worthy of worship.”⁴³ Moser points to the enemy-loving Father of Jesus as a rare suitable candidate for the worship-worthy title of God.⁴⁴ Not all biblical portraits of Yahweh meet this standard, Moser admits. Psalm 5:5 and 11:5, for instance, portray Yahweh as hating his enemies.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the Father of Jesus seems to qualify. Thus far, Moser has not invoked or drawn upon any formal categories of Trinitarian theology.

Turning to Jesus, Moser argues from evidence in the Gospels that Jesus himself understands knowledge of God to depend upon “consciousness of one’s standing in a child-parent, or filial, relationship to God as righteously gracious Father.” Jesus, for his part, “regarded himself as God’s unique Priest, Judge, King, Messiah, Son, and Redeemer, as the one sent by God to fulfill the hopes of Israel and thus of all other nations as well.”⁴⁶ None of this requires Jesus understanding himself to be the one God or a member of a triune God. Jesus explicitly identifies the God who is worthy of worship as his righteous Father rather than himself. “The New Testament gospels,” Moser observes, “do not give Jesus a status equal to his Father; see, for instance, Mark 10:18, John 17:3.”⁴⁷ Rather,

⁴³ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 18, emphasis original.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; *The Evidence for God*, 236.

⁴⁶ Paul K. Moser, “Jesus on Knowledge of God,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 28, no. 4 (1999): 593-594.

⁴⁷ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 93.

Jesus exercises authority as “God’s viceroy.”⁴⁸ Faith in God in Christ, as 2 Corinthians 5:19 puts it, is “faith in God *as represented* in Christ.”⁴⁹ It seems, then, that Moser does not draw upon a Trinitarian theology, on which Jesus would be the second divine member of a triune God. Rather, he employs a *viceregal* or *representative* Christology, inspired by the New Testament, according to which Jesus acts as God’s unique, authoritative representative and agent. Indeed, Moser suggests that the best self-manifestation of a God who is worthy of worship would be “a personal agent with a perfect moral character, and not something less representative of God.”⁵⁰

Turning to the Spirit of God, Moser understands this Spirit to be “the Spirit of Jesus and of his divine Father,” such that “New Testament Christology, including the character of Christ, gives some definite contours to the understanding of God’s Spirit and thereby saves it from obscure mysticism.”⁵¹ Moser notes that the Bible lacks a “detailed metaphysics of the Spirit,” yet biblical authors “often characterize this Spirit functionally, as *God in action*, with distinctive power.”⁵² God’s Spirit both anoints Jesus for his role as God’s unique representative and is, in turn, given by Jesus to receptive people. Indeed, God’s present-day self-manifestation is exclusively available through the risen Christ and the Spirit of God given to us. For this reason, Moser also describes his Gethsemane epistemology as a *pneumatic* epistemology. The character of this experience of God’s

⁴⁸ Moser, “Jesus on Knowledge of God,” 593.

⁴⁹ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 92, emphasis original.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 311; cf. 137, 219, 272, 296.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 284, emphasis original.

Spirit is governed by the character of God as represented to us in Jesus. Namely, “the power of God’s Spirit is inherently the power of self-sacrificial *agapē* exemplified in the obedient crucified Jesus.”⁵³ It would seem, then, that neither Moser’s theology, Christology, nor pneumatology draws upon a traditional Trinitarian doctrine or notion of God as triune.

Trinitarian Theology in Light of Gethsemane Epistemology

Paul Moser’s Gethsemane (or pneumatic) epistemology represents a stark alternative to various other epistemologies available to theologians. Moser insists that knowledge requires evidence, but rejects the evidence employed in natural theology as unsuited to knowledge of a God worthy of worship. He also rejects fideistic approaches to knowledge of God as based on arbitrary authorities or mere systematic coherence. Instead, knowledge of God requires evidence provided via God’s self-manifestation. Such evidence is available on God’s terms, and inquirers ought to seek it out rather than simply reflect on the evidence they currently possess or control. Moser depicts his Gethsemane epistemology as normative and exclusive. Effectively, he attempts to articulate how God would have us come to know God. Any approach to knowledge of God that avoids knowing God on God’s terms amounts to cognitive idolatry.

How does Moser’s Gethsemane epistemology bear on Trinitarian theology and inquiry about the doctrine of the Trinity? Moser himself seems to make little use of any explicit notion of God as triune, although he speaks freely and often of the functions of

⁵³ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 289.

Jesus, his Father, and his Spirit in redemptive human experience. This thesis *does not* aim to reconstruct Paul Moser's implicit understanding of the Trinity from his writing. Perhaps he will address the doctrine of the Trinity in his future writing. Rather, our concern is to draw out the implications of Moser's Gethsemane epistemology for theological inquiry, particularly inquiry about the doctrine of the Trinity. This thesis argues that, following Moser's distinct theological epistemology, the doctrine of the Trinity ought to explain a person's experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus using categories that comport with God's purposes in being known. If an account of the Trinity neglects God's self-manifestation in experience or uses categories that obscure it, then that account encourages cognitive idolatry.

We begin, in Chapter 2, by discerning three pertinent features of Paul Moser's general (i.e., non-religious) epistemology.⁵⁴ We may call these the *perspectival* feature, the *intentional meaning* feature, and the *evidential* feature. These features respectively (1) construe human inquiry as inescapably perspective-bound; (2) construe human concepts and linguistic meaning as irreducibly purpose-relative; and (3) construe the justification needed for knowledge as ultimately dependent upon the perspectival evidence of one's subjective nonconceptual experiences. On Moser's account, therefore, perspective-bound human truth-seekers must explain their nonconceptual experiences using concepts that are sensitive to their specific purposes as inquirers.

⁵⁴ Moser develops his epistemology in the following three monographs: *Empirical Justification*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy 34 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); *Knowledge and Evidence*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy (1989; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *Philosophy after Objectivity: Making Sense in Perspective* (1993; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

New considerations arise when inquiry concerns a God who is worthy of worship. Chapter 3 examines Moser's account of divine self-manifestation in light of God's worship-worthy character. It also examines Moser's related notions of *cognitive idolatry* and *ethics for inquiry* about God. Cognitive idolatry occurs where human and divine purposes in inquiry diverge and human inquirers neglect, obscure, misinterpret, or otherwise ignore the evidence of God's self-manifestation. Moser's ethics for inquiry about God consist of normative principles meant to align the purposes of theological inquirers with God's purposes in being known. Taken together, Chapter 3 concludes that Moser's Gethsemane epistemology requires that theological belief be justified for a person only insofar as it explains God's self-manifestation in experience using categories and interpretive commitments that comport with God's redemptive purposes in being known.

Chapter 4 begins with a taxonomy of accounts of the Trinity and argues that any successful account must incorporate a basic notion of self as (somehow) applicable to the Trinity. Purposefully unclear, inconsistent, or impersonal accounts of the Trinity are rejected as inadequate in this regard. Chapter 4 then argues that, within Moser's theological framework, the doctrine of the Trinity ought to explain a person's experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus, namely as the Spirit that Jesus both receives and pours out, using categories that comport with God's purposes in being known. Furthermore, Christians ought to appropriate the Christian preaching or *kerygma* about Jesus on the basis of their own experience of his Spirit using categories formed by the guidance of the Spirit. Chapter 5 offer a summary, sketches where the pneumatic approach to the Trinity under development might lead, and evaluates this approach.

CHAPTER TWO

PHILOSOPHICAL PRELIMINARIES

Our quarry in this thesis is the epistemic status of belief that God is triune, within Paul Moser's epistemology and in light of his concern to avoid cognitive idolatry. This chapter examines three features of Moser's philosophy that bear on this quarry by clarifying human truth-seeking. We may call them the perspectival feature, the intentional meaning feature, and the evidential feature. These features respectively (1) construe human inquiry as inescapably perspective-bound; (2) construe human concepts and linguistic meaning as irreducibly purpose-relative; and (3) construe the justification needed for knowledge as dependent upon the perspectival evidence of a person's subjective nonconceptual experiences. Taken together, perspective-bound human truth-seekers should strive to explain their perspectival nonconceptual experiences using concepts that vary according to their specific purposes in inquiry.

The Perspectival Feature of Paul Moser's Philosophy

Truth-seekers naturally seek knowledge of the way things are. Is such knowledge available to them? We do well to distinguish knowledge of the way things are from knowledge of the way things seem to us. The way things seem is *person-relative* or *perspectival*. The way things are does not so vary. Truth-seekers ought to wonder, When does the way things seem correspond to the way things are?

Objectivity as Conceiving-Independence

To appreciate the human cognitive situation, we must distinguish between facts that do and facts that do not depend on what (and whether) conceivers conceive. Paul Moser describes a *conceiving-independent* object or feature as an object or feature that does not depend, logically or causally, on what or whether any conceiver conceives of it.¹ For instance, an exoplanet orbiting the star Proxima Centauri does not depend for its existence on any human conceiving of it (or of any conceiver conceiving of anything else). The existence of that exoplanet is conceiving-independent. By comparison, the modern astronomical notion of an exoplanet is a definition stipulated by conceivers (likewise for the current definition of a planet). That we classify a particular object orbiting Proxima Centauri as an “exoplanet” is a conceiving-dependent feature of that object even if the existence of that object remains conceiving-independent.

The way things are involves both conceiving-dependent and conceiving-independent facts. Some facts are true in virtue of what conceivers conceive. Others are true without reference to what any conceiver conceives. Objectivity, as Moser uses the term, means conceiving-independence.² An objective fact is a conceiving-independent fact. Likewise for an objective object or feature. Moser also defines ontological knowledge as “knowledge of conceiving-independent reality.”³ We can also call such knowledge

¹ More precisely, Moser calls this “weak” conceiving-independence. “Strong” conceiving-independence involves an object or feature being logically and causally independent of someone conceiving of something. *Philosophy after Objectivity: Making Sense in Perspective* (1993; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21.

² Ibid., 17.

³ Ibid.

objective knowledge. The quest for objectivity, then, is a quest for ontological knowledge, namely knowledge of the way things are apart from what conceivers conceive of them. Objective or ontological truth is likewise truth about conceiving-independent reality.

Is such objective knowledge available to human conceivers? Perhaps. We may in fact possess knowledge or true beliefs about any number of conceiving-independent objects or features of objective reality. Even so, stubborn questions remain about whether we can discern or test that we possess objective truth or knowledge. To explore these questions, Moser brings realism into dialogue with skepticism. Realists, on Moser's definition, affirm the existence of conceiving-independent objects and essential features. Moser defends realism against a variety of charges, claiming that it is conceptually coherent.⁴ Realists, however, ought not to be satisfied with the mere coherence of their doctrine. They ought to claim that it is true, or that we can know that objective objects and essences exist. Such claims, Moser warns, invite a formidable skeptical challenge that realists can neither answer nor dismiss.

The Challenge of Global Skepticism

All of our beliefs come to us via our cognitive or belief-forming sources. These include "perception, memory, introspection, testimony, intuition, common sense," and others.⁵ Realists claim that at least some of these beliefs qualify as knowledge about objective or conceiving-independent reality. Since what is known must first be true, realists claim that some of these beliefs about objective or conceiving-independent reality

⁴ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 21-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

are true beliefs. Realists thereby claim that some of their cognitive or belief-forming sources are at least somewhat *reliable* in conveying true beliefs about objective reality.

Skeptics challenge realists to provide a reason to think that our cognitive or belief-forming sources and processes, taken as a whole, are at least somewhat reliable.

Skeptics want to know if our cognitive sources and processes reliably convey true belief, at least sometimes.⁶ Skeptics are not asking for proof of the infallibility of some cognitive source. Rather, they ask realists for a reason to think that our potentially fallible cognitive sources are somewhat reliable. Realists can either take this skeptical challenge seriously or ignore it. Ignoring skeptics, however, will not make them or their troubling questions go away. Instead, as Moser recommends, we can shed light on the type of evidence actually available to truth-seekers by taking skeptics and their questions seriously.

Moser insists that we cannot take skeptics and their questions seriously while also begging their questions.⁷ To beg the question in the context of a dialogue is to use the very matter under dispute as support for itself. For instance, when skeptics ask for evidence for the reliability of our belief-forming sources, our response cannot include an appeal to the reliability of our belief-forming sources. Such an appeal would beg the question in this context. It would set forth as evidence the very matter under dispute. Question begging dialogue is inescapably arbitrary. Worse, it ignores the concerns of one's dialogue partner, who cannot accept the matter under dispute as evidence for anything, let alone as evidence for itself.

⁶ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 41-57.

⁷ Ibid., 43.

Accordingly, skeptics seek evidence from realists that does not beg their questions. Since the skeptic questions the reliability of cognitive sources, taken *as a group* of sources, realists may not appeal to the reliability of one cognitive source while arguing for the reliability of another. Such an appeal begs the question against the skeptic in this context. Once we abandon question-begging, however, an intractable predicament emerges.

The underlying problem is that we cannot assume a position outside our cognitively relevant processes from which we can effectively discern their reliability, or success, regarding the accessing of conceiving-independent facts. This evidently is the inescapable human cognitive predicament.⁸

Taking skeptics seriously illuminates this problem, a problem that we might otherwise ignore. Moser presses his point further and examines a typical form of realist argument meant to conclude that they have knowledge that external objects exist. In this argument, *P* can be any proposition, including the proposition “external objects exist.”

1. If one’s belief that *P* has feature *F*, then one knows that *P*.
2. My belief that external objects exist has *F*.
3. Hence, I know that external objects exist.⁹

A realist might appeal to a variety of features *F* in this argument, such as:

(a) suitable doxastic coherence; (b) maximal explanatory efficacy; (c) undefeated self-evidentness; (d) consistent predictive success; (e) uncontested communal acceptance; (f) causal sustenance by such belief-forming processes as perception, memory, introspection, intuition, or testimony; (g) adequate theoretical elegance in terms of such “virtuous” characteristics as simplicity and comprehensiveness; (h) survival value in the evolutionary scheme of things; or (i) some combination of (a) through (h).¹⁰

⁸ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Each of these features, and also their various combinations, represents potential ways for a realist to discern that they have knowledge that external objects exist. Yet that which is known must also be true. This argument only works, then, if we can also discern that a belief is *true* by discerning that it has feature *F*. A thoughtful skeptic will ask the realist for an epistemic (rather than pragmatic, aesthetic, or traditional) reason to think that beliefs with feature *F* are true. Granting that some belief *P* has feature *F*, why think that it is true?

Realists cannot reply with an appeal to the reliability of feature *F*, at least not without begging the question and ending their dialogue with skeptics. They cannot appeal to the reliability (in discerning true belief) of feature *F* as support for its own reliability. Even if the belief that “feature *F* reliably identifies true beliefs” *itself* has feature *F*, we still may not appeal to the reliability of that feature. The challenge is precisely to provide a reason that feature *F* is a reliable guide to objective truth *without* appealing to feature *F* itself.¹¹ As with questions about the reliability of our belief-forming sources, so also with questions about our preferred features of our trusted beliefs.

Conditional Ontological Agnosticism

Faced with this comprehensive skeptical challenge, Paul Moser recommends significant concessions to skeptics. He concedes (and indeed defends) a doctrine that he calls *conditional ontological agnosticism*, “the view that if we seek agnostic-resistant non-questionbegging evidence for our ontological claims, we shall not succeed.”¹² Put another

¹¹ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

way, we cannot meet the skeptic's challenge, at least not to their satisfaction. This does not mean that we lack an effective reply to skeptics, as we shall see. It does mean, however, that we have no reply to skeptics that will satisfy their standards for knowledge.

Moser does not promote an *unqualified* ontological agnosticism. He merely concedes *conditional* ontological agnosticism to the skeptic. In practice, however, he denies the condition and avoids ontological agnosticism itself. The condition in question concerns the skeptic's standards for knowledge and evidence. Skeptics remain agnostic about ontological matters for two reasons. First, they (like us) lack a means of effectively testing the reliability of their cognitive sources. Second, they (perhaps unlike us) require such a test to avoid ontological agnosticism. Conditional ontological agnosticism affirms that *if* we require such a test to avoid ontological agnosticism then there is no escape. It does not, however, affirm the skeptical requirement for such a test. Therefore, Moser does not argue "that we cannot have, do not have, or even do not know that we have, ontological knowledge," but rather "that we cannot effectively discern that we have such knowledge."¹³ The truth may be known, but not by skeptical standards.

Conditional ontological agnosticism contends that if we (like realists) cast our lot in with skeptics, namely "if we demand support for our beliefs from agnostic-resistant non-questionbegging epistemic reasons," then no escape from ontological agnosticism remains. We face a choice between ontological agnosticism and the condition that our beliefs need support "from agnostic-resistant non-questionbegging epistemic reasons."¹⁴

¹³ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

For those who value dialogue, question-begging is out of the question. Our epistemic reasons, however, need not be agnostic-resistant. We may deny the condition of conditional ontological agnosticism by seeking *perspectival* support for our beliefs. Such support will not satisfy skeptics since it is not objective support. Even so, as skeptics have shown us, perspectival support it is the only support available to perspective-bound human inquirers.

By pressing conditional ontological agnosticism, Moser aims “to change the subject from agnostic-resistant reasons to a kind of support that is avowedly perspectival, relative to a theorist’s (variable) semantic commitments and relevant purposes in theorizing.”¹⁵ This change of subject is a shift from grasping after objectivity toward perspectival inquiry. We call this the perspectival feature of Moser’s philosophy, given how Moser uses skeptical questions to establish that human inquiry is inescapably perspectival or person-relative. Leaving behind various quests for reliable access to the objective truth, we must make do with making sense in perspective. Only perspectival support for our beliefs remains. Although skeptics may not be interested in such support, they have no authority to prevent others from using it to good effect, as we shall see.

The Intentional Meaning Feature of Paul Moser’s Philosophy

Inquirers use language to pose questions and answer them. In light of now familiar skeptical objections, can inquirers appeal to objective linguistic meaning or notions as they carry out inquiry in perspective? Paul Moser argues that they cannot. Meaning and concepts are perspectival or person-relative. They vary according to the purposes of the

¹⁵ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 58-59.

language user. Even so, perspective-bound inquirers have a firm foundation for inquiry since what is analytically true for inquirers depends on their purposes and commitments as language interpreters and users.

The Ubiquity of Concepts and Minimal Conceptual-Taking

Paul Moser describes a concept or notion (we use the two terms interchangeably) as a set of semantic standards that constitute, for a person, what counts as correct use of a term (or closely related terms).¹⁶ For instance, given a common notion of knowledge as something requiring true belief, it is incorrect for someone who holds such a notion to speak of false belief as knowledge. To have a notion of X is then to have standards that discriminate between correct and incorrect language use concerning X . The correctness in question is relative to our notion of X , since notions *constitute* for us, rather than simply describe, standards for correct language use.

Concepts and concept-formation are ubiquitous in purposeful human inquiry. Inquirers cannot avoid using concepts, on pain of rendering inquiry aimless. Those who lack any notions in inquiry lack any standards for what counts as correct use of their terms. Suppose an inquirer asks a question of the form “What is X ?”, where X stands for something they seek to clarify or better understand (such as knowledge or divinity). Asking such a question requires having some minimal understanding of what we mean by X . Without some standard, however vague, to distinguish between correct and incorrect use of the term X , the question “What is X ?” is fully indeterminate. We might as well ask

¹⁶ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 76-81.

“What is anything?” Paul Moser calls this the *conceptual-taking requirement* on minimal understanding. Namely, “your minimally understanding the question of what *X* is requires that you take certain distinguishing features or considerations as at least partly constituting what it is to be *X*.”¹⁷ Human inquirers must therefore wield concepts, however minimal or vague, in order to ask their questions. This remains so even when the question seeks conceptual clarification. We need a minimal notion before we can clarify it. Inquiry involves using and forming concepts from the outset.

Meaning via Interpretation Rather Than Language Use

We now turn from concepts to meaning. What accounts for linguistic meaning? Perhaps language use somehow governs linguistic meaning. Paul Moser critiques various attempts to account for linguistic meaning in terms of language use before arguing instead that meaning governs language use. First, perhaps language is meaningful in virtue of expressing a truth or falsehood. Moser objects that meaningful language need not express a truth or falsehood.¹⁸ The commands of imperative language, for instance, are neither true nor false. Yet such commands are meaningful. We ought not, therefore, to confuse meaningful language use with truth-valued language use.

Second, perhaps language is meaningful in virtue of being explicitly rule-governed language use. If so then a person’s “own rules for linguistic use . . . determine what terms mean” for them.¹⁹ Moser objects that children use language in a meaningful way yet

¹⁷ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 106.

¹⁹ Ibid., 108.

generally cannot articulate any rules governing their language use.²⁰ Perhaps then language is meaningful in virtue of being implicitly rule-governed. If so, “meaningful language-use is just language use with a certain kind of regularity: that is, use in accord with, but not necessarily explicitly governed by, certain regular patterns of use.”²¹ This account also fails, Moser argues, since a person may use meaningless language in a habitual way. They could form a habit of blurting out nonsense at each passerby. This nasty habit would not render their nonsensical linguistic tokens meaningful for them.²² We ought not, therefore, to confuse meaningful language use with rule-governed language use, whether explicit or implicit.

Third, if individual patterns of language use cannot confer linguistic meaning, perhaps social patterns can. Perhaps language is meaningful in virtue of socially shared linguistic rules or regularities. Moser objects that we lack any relevant distinction between the individual and their social group.²³ If individual habitual language use does not confer linguistic meaning, why think that collective habitual use would? We ought not, therefore, to confuse meaningful language use with language conforming to social regularities.

Finally, perhaps language is meaningful in virtue of being purposeful language use, namely language used as a means to an end. Moser objects that meaningful language use can be accidental or without purpose. Persons might accidentally blurt out something meaningful to themselves or to others without intending to accomplish something by it,

²⁰ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 109.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²² *Ibid.*, 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 113.

perhaps even in spite of their intentions. Furthermore, they might utter meaningless gibberish with the express purpose of confusing or startling others.²⁴ Purposeful use of language therefore does not account for linguistic meaning.

Indeed, no attempt to account for meaning in terms of language use seems tenable thus far. Meaningful language may be truth-valued, (individually or socially) rule-governed, or even purposeful. Yet it is not meaningful in virtue of these features since it can lack any of them. What accounts for meaning if not language use? Moser makes the following proposal, which he hopes “accommodates our everyday notion of meaning as far as possible.”

The meaningfulness (or the ‘having meaning’) of certain tokens [e.g., verbal sounds or written inscriptions] for one consists in one’s understanding those tokens: that is, one’s nonextraneous interpretation, or construal, of those tokens as indicating (that is, designating) or expressing something, if only for oneself.²⁵

Moser calls this approach to meaning *semantic interpretationism*, the view that “meaning derives from understanding, and that understanding derives from nonextraneous interpretation, or construal, regarding a token’s indicating or expressing something.” This account of meaning stands apart from the alternatives described above in that, as Moser writes, “my view of meaning as nonextraneous interpretation contrasts with a doctrine of meaning as use.”²⁶ Interpretation, rather than use, accounts for linguistic meaning. Yet not just any interpretation can confer meaning, only “nonextraneous” interpretation can. This requires further explanation.

²⁴ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 116.

²⁵ Ibid., 117.

²⁶ Ibid., 125.

An interpretation of a linguistic token can include elements both *extraneous* and *nonextraneous* to meaning. You may interpret the verbal token “I see smoke” as expressing that I, the one who uttered the token, see smoke. You may also interpret this token, naturally enough, as signifying the likely presence of fire. As they say, where there’s smoke there’s fire. Even so, the token “I see smoke” doesn’t *mean* that there is fire, although you may naturally interpret it that way. “I see smoke” means something other than “There is fire” for many language users, even when their interpretation of the one includes the other.

To account for this, the meaning of a token for a person depends on their nonextraneous interpretation of that token, rather than their overall interpretation. Nonextraneous interpretation consists of an overall interpretation stripped of all but what Moser calls a base-interpretation.²⁷ This base-interpretation partly constitutes a person’s own standards for correct interpretation of that token. A base-interpretation of “I see smoke” restricts its meaning to prevent confusing it with “There is fire.” The component of your interpretation of the token “I see smoke” that involves the likely presence of fire is extraneous to the meaning of that token, even though this extraneous component belongs to your overall interpretation of this token. “I see smoke” can therefore mean something other than “There is fire” even when the overall interpretation of the one often includes the other.

On this account of meaning, we may speak of standards constituting correct *interpretation* (rather than correct *use*) of a token for a person. These standards “yield

²⁷ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 118.

determinate meaning via inclusion and exclusion.”²⁸ A meaningless token, such as a token of mere gibberish, is a token without any standards for correct interpretation. Standards for interpretation can be either vague or precise. Where standards for interpretation are absent, meaning is also absent.

Meaning and Concepts as Purpose-Relative

A linguistic token can have meaning for a person even when they are not using or interpreting it. To account for this, Moser introduces a notion of a *dispositional interpretive commitment* as a commitment to interpret a linguistic token in a particular way in appropriate situations over some time period.²⁹ Learning a new language, for example, seems to involve forming new dispositional interpretive commitments to henceforth interpret various (once foreign) linguistic tokens in a particular way.

Although nonextraneous interpretation rather than language use accounts for meaning, nonextraneous interpretation governs purposeful language use. Moser describes *interpretively purposive* language use as follows:

In such use, one intentionally uses *T* to perform an act one interprets *T* as accomplishing in virtue of what, on one’s nonextraneous interpretation, *T* indicates or expresses . . . one’s goal in using a token is set by one’s nonextraneous interpretation of that token.³⁰

Linguistic meaning accounts for linguistic use rather than the reverse. A person’s interpretive commitments are standards constituting for them correct *interpretation* of

²⁸ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 119.

²⁹ Ibid., 126.

³⁰ Ibid., 129.

tokens. Their concepts or notions are standards constituting for them correct *use* of tokens. The former govern the latter for interpretively purposive language.³¹ Purposeful language use relies on interpretive commitments to determine whether, in virtue of its meaning for a person, a linguistic token can serve for them as a means to an end.

On Moser's account of linguistic meaning as nonextraneous interpretation, concepts or notions are purpose-relative in two ways. First, we can use meaningful language with a purpose in view. Concepts are standards that constitute the correct use of terms for us. Our purposes as language users determine what counts as correct use of language. So our purposes shape our concepts. That is, we use linguistic tokens correctly when they serve as means toward our purpose-relative ends. Second, language serves various purposes because of what it means to language users. This meaning, in turn, depends on purpose-relative nonextraneous interpretive commitments. Language serves various purposes in virtue of what it means, and means what it does in virtue of purpose governed interpretation. As such, both the *interpretation* and the *use* of linguistic tokens are purpose-relative.

We should acknowledge that although interpretive commitments can be intentional, they need not be. "Such a commitment can be socially learned and need not arise from extensive reflection."³² We should therefore distinguish between *reflective* and *unreflective* interpretive commitments. Reflective interpretive commitments are formed with the interpreter's own purpose in view. Unreflective interpretive commitments lack

³¹ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 127.

³² *Ibid.*, 126.

this feature. In this unreflective case, a person's interpretive commitments may unintentionally mimic the interpretive commitments held by others. Unreflective interpretive commitments may nevertheless serve a purpose, albeit a purpose other than that of the language user. Whether reflective or unreflective, our meaning and notions are sensitive to our purposes as language users.

Analyticity in Perspective

Since our interpretive commitments guide our conceptual commitments, our chosen notions can enjoy a conceptual necessity, namely truth in virtue of what we mean by our terms. This necessity is perspectival, like the interpretive commitments upon which it depends. Moser defends a distinction between analytic and synthetic truth along these lines and introduces a perspectival notion analyticity:

A sentence, *S*, is analytically true for a person, *X*, at time *t* if and only if at *t* *X*, when motivated just by her nonextraneous interpretive commitments regarding *S*'s constituent terms, will reject all (potential) falsifiers of *S*.³³

“Analytic truths,” Moser continues, “are true just in virtue of conceptual commitments; they are thus *conceptually* necessarily true.”³⁴ Analytic truths, then, are true as a result of what we mean by the terms we use. Our interpretive commitments determine what is analytically true for us. Any objection to an analytic truth (for us) will strike us as an objection to our interpretive commitments. Unless we adjust those commitments, no objection can undermine an analytic truth for us. We are nevertheless free to revise our

³³ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 146.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 146, emphasis original.

interpretive commitments. That is, we can revise that which is analytic for us. It changes at the speed of our changing commitments to interpret linguistic tokens in certain ways.³⁵

On Moser's account, analyticity is perspectival since it depends on perspectival interpretive commitments.³⁶ Moser regards this as a virtue of his approach, writing that "my approach to analyticity . . . allows for semantic, or conceptual, relativism — for a diversity of interpretive commitments and resulting specific notions."³⁷ That which is analytic for one person need not be analytic for another person if they do not share the needed interpretive commitments. Since each person is free to form their own divergent interpretive commitments, different people can and do have different specific concepts even when they share general versions of those concepts. Moser calls this phenomenon *conceptual relativism*. Conceptual relativism follows from the perspectival nature of conceptual necessity. When analytic truth is perspectival, different perspectives can simultaneously appeal to conceptual necessity.

The alternative to conceptual relativism is what Moser calls the *myth of the definite article*, namely "the view that there must be, or at least is, such a thing as *the* concept of" *X*.³⁸ An appeal to an objective, or person-invariant, notion is an appeal to conceiving-independent reality. Such an appeal faces the shrewd skeptical questions discussed above and runs afoul of conditional ontological agnosticism. An appeal to an objective notion (or definite article) also treats one set of interpretive commitments as objective. Since these

³⁵ Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity*, 151.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98, emphasis original.

commitments are purpose-relative and perspectival, they cannot be conceiver-independent. Lacking effective access to conceiver-independent reality, we must make do with conceptual relativism. Even so, perspective-bound inquirers now have a firm place to stand—upon their concept-forming intentions and interpretive commitments.³⁹

The Evidential Feature of Paul Moser’s Philosophy

What then of synthetic truth, which does not enjoy conceptual necessity? On what basis can perspective-bound inquirers have empirical knowledge? “Human knowledge,” Paul Moser writes, “is a vital commodity whose conditions we can disregard only to our own detriment.”⁴⁰ Having examined the perspectival and intentional meaning features of Moser’s philosophy, we now turn to his account of the justification needed for knowledge. On Moser’s account, such justification ultimately rests upon perspectival *evidence* needing explanation, namely “the subjective contents of nonconceptual experiences.”⁴¹ We call this the *evidential feature* of Paul Moser’s philosophy. The foundational evidence in question is both perspectival and in need of interpretation.

The Justification Needed for Knowledge

Our concern for the moment is with *propositional* knowledge, namely knowledge *that* something or other is the case, or knowledge *about* something or other. As it is

³⁹ Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (2008; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 274.

⁴⁰ Paul K. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy (1989; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

generally conceived, propositional knowledge requires justified true belief.⁴² True beliefs don't always qualify as knowledge. A lucky guess, for instance, does not amount to knowledge, which "requires that the knower have *adequate indication* that a known proposition is true."⁴³ The justification condition on knowledge accounts for this distinction between knowledge and merely true belief. Accordingly, Moser broadly construes justification as "an adequate indication, relative to one's total evidence, that a proposition is true."⁴⁴

Beliefs are justified relative to some purpose or end in believing. Obtaining truth is not the only possible purpose in believing. For instance, beliefs that are *prudent* for someone to believe (apart from their truth) can be *prudentially* justified for them. For instance, hoping against hope for a rescue might be prudent for survival if adrift at sea in a lifeboat, even when a person lacks any reason to expect rescue. However, if "the end in view is truth, and truth alone, *epistemic* justification is all-important."⁴⁵ Our present concern is with the epistemic justification needed for propositional knowledge. Such justification is distinct from the truth and belief conditions for knowledge. Justified beliefs need not be true beliefs.⁴⁶ A person could have adequate indication that some belief is true

⁴² Although justified true belief is necessary for knowledge, it is not sufficient. Knowledge requires a controversial fourth condition that accounts for the what are known as *Gettier counterexamples*. These counterexamples show that a person can have justified true belief without having knowledge. See Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 232-255.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁵ Paul K. Moser, *Empirical Justification*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy 34 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 1, emphasis original.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7-8.

even when it turns out to be false. For instance, if a promised rescue ship itself sank before arriving, unbeknownst to one adrift in a lifeboat, they could be justified yet mistaken in expecting a rescue. We therefore distinguish knowledge from justified yet false belief. We furthermore distinguish propositions that are justified for a person and justified beliefs. If a person adrift in a lifeboat received a trustworthy promise of rescue, but refuses to expect one, the proposition that they will be rescued can be justifiable for them without being a justified belief. A proposition can enjoy adequate indication that it is true, relative to a person's evidence, without them believing it.⁴⁷

Since Moser understands epistemic justification in terms of an adequate indication that a proposition is true, he construes justification in terms of evidence. Propositions are justified for a person in relation to their evidence. Moser distinguishes between *justifiable* propositions, namely propositions that would be justified for a person provided that they associate them with the needed evidence, and propositions that are in fact *justified* for them. "The basic idea here is that a proposition is actually justified for one only if one has associated that proposition with its supporting evidence in a certain way."⁴⁸ The mere presence or availability of supporting evidence does not justify a proposition. A person could ignore the evidence, in which case the proposition would be merely justifiable but not justified for them. Indeed, a person could believe a justifiable proposition for some reason other than the justifying evidence. Such belief would be epistemically unjustified

⁴⁷ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9, cf. 141.

and would not qualify as knowledge, despite being true and despite being justifiable for them.

So understood, knowledge requires true belief that is held on account of adequate evidence, where evidence is some indication that the proposition in question is true. Apart from some indication that a proposition is true, truth-seekers have no epistemic reason (namely no justification) for believing. Prudential, social, aesthetic, or any other type of reason notwithstanding, those seeking *epistemic* or truth-oriented justification for their beliefs, namely truth-seekers, need evidence in order to believe. When the purpose in believing is to believe the truth, belief is justified on the basis of evidence.

Foundational Evidence and Its Alternatives

We now consider Moser's case for foundational evidence. One proposition serves as evidence for another when (1) the one proposition indicates, to some extent, that the other proposition is true and (2) there is some indication that the first proposition is true. When the indication is adequate for justification, one justified proposition can justify another.⁴⁹ This process is called *inferential justification*: an asymmetric, non-reflexive justification-conferring relation between propositions. No proposition is self-justified via inferential justification. Neither are any pair of propositions mutually justified in this way. Rather, justified propositions form chains. Each member of the chain justifies the next member via inferential justification and receives its own justification from the previous member in the same way.

⁴⁹ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 24.

A regress problem emerges given such chains of inferential justification. Put simply, how do these chains of justification terminate? Is each inferentially justified proposition preceded by an infinite series of inferentially justified propositions? Or do chains of justification form circles or webs of justification? Barring these possibilities, chains of justification must begin with foundational propositions. However, any foundational proposition, being the first in the chain, cannot itself be inferentially justified by a preceding member of the chain. Are foundational propositions justified or not? If they are justified, how are they justified apart from inferential justification?

Faced with this regress problem, Moser argues for a version of epistemic foundationalism. That is, he argues that the notion of inferential justification between propositions calls for foundational propositions that are justified *noninferentially*, without appeal to other propositions as evidence.⁵⁰ This doesn't mean that foundational propositions are justified apart from evidence, apart from any indication that they are true. Rather, Moser distinguishes between *propositional* and *nonpropositional* evidence. Evidence can be either a proposition or something else. When evidence is not a proposition, it is nonpropositional evidence. Foundational propositions are justifiable on account of nonpropositional evidence, namely truth-indicators that do not consist of propositions. The chain of evidence terminates with evidence that is neither a belief nor a proposition.

⁵⁰ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 144.

Moser criticizes various alternative solutions to the epistemic regress problem in great detail.⁵¹ Against (rare) partisans of infinite justificatory regress, namely infinite chains of justified propositions, Moser insists that we construe such chains as infinite series of *conditionally* inferentially justified propositions.⁵² We ought not to assume that justification via infinite regress is possible. The subsequent members of a chain are justified only if a preceding member is justified. The partisan of infinite justificatory regress has not shown that *any* prior member of the chain is in fact justified, and each member stands upon an infinite regress.

Coherentists instead argue for circular loops or webs of justification chains. Moser objects that their proposals permit them to divorce justification from their total evidence.⁵³ Coherentists only allow inferential justification based on propositional evidence, so each member of their justification chain (or web) is a proposition. Since they neglect nonpropositional evidence, they do not account for their total evidence.

Barring justification via infinite regress or mere coherence, chains of inferentially justified propositions must begin with foundational members. Such foundational propositions are either justified or unjustified. In the latter case, justification via unjustified foundations is completely arbitrary. It permits justification via known falsehoods. Advocates of unjustified foundations known as *contextualists* therefore limit unjustified foundations to beliefs that enjoy a *social consensus* in some context. Such beliefs are

⁵¹ The regress problem is the primary subject addressed in Moser, *Empirical Justification*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 111-112, cf. 107-116.

⁵³ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 177.

unjustified for a person, but nevertheless popular among their peers. Moser criticizes contextualism as “irrelevant to the epistemic justification of a belief” insofar as a social consensus is not an indicator that a proposition is true, only that it is widely believed.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it is unclear which social consensus (amongst many) ought to be foundational for a person. Contextualism remains irreparably arbitrary.⁵⁵

The last option is *justified* foundational propositions. Such foundational propositions are by definition justified apart from their relations to other propositions. How then are they justified? Against epistemic externalism, Moser insists that foundational justification requires a person having for themselves an epistemic reason, or an adequate indication, that the foundational proposition is true.⁵⁶ Any other justification is no justification at all. He also criticizes epistemic reliabilism, “the widely held view that the epistemic justification of a belief is a function of the reliability of the process that causes that belief.”⁵⁷ Justification requires evidence and belief-forming processes can be reliable apart from a person having evidence that they are reliable. Without evidence they do not have any indication that a belief is true, whether or not it comes from a reliable source. With evidence, however, they have an indication of truth even when the source is generally unreliable.⁵⁸ Evidence, rather than reliability, governs justification.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 53; cf. 29-58.

⁵⁵ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 186.

⁵⁶ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 120-130.

⁵⁷ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 194.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁹ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 130-138.

Moser concludes that “any plausible solution to the epistemic regress problem will rely on some species of intuitionist foundationalism.”⁶⁰ That is, justified propositions ultimately trace their justification back to foundational propositions. These, in turn, are justified on the basis of evidence. Foundational evidence cannot, by definition, be a proposition. Foundational evidence is therefore nonpropositional, and consists of “the subjective nonconceptual contents of experience (e.g., what one seems to perceive).”⁶¹

Immediate Justification, Experience, and Explanation

We now turn to Moser’s account of *immediate justification* and foundational evidence. “Most people have no understanding of immediate justification,” Moser writes, “yet it seems that they can nonetheless be immediately justified in believing many things.”⁶² This is because most people have beliefs that are justified for them apart from any inference on their part from another justified belief, even if they never notice as much.

The immediate justification of foundational beliefs is also known as *noninferential* justification since it does not depend on propositional evidence. Instead, foundational evidence consists of the contents of one’s subjective nonconceptual experiences.⁶³ Moser construes the relevant experience in terms of attention-attraction or psychological presentation.⁶⁴ Direct attention-attraction is the phenomenon “where one’s attention is

⁶⁰ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 205.

⁶¹ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 2.

⁶² Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 186.

⁶³ For details on the following taxonomy, see Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 81-88.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86. Indeed, he “preserves a univocal basis for experience, viz., direct attention-attraction understood as psychological presentation.”

directly engaged, if only momentarily, by the more or less determinate features of certain presented contents.”⁶⁵

Such attention-attraction can be either perceptual or nonperceptual in that it may or may not involve sensory experience. A perceptual example clarifies certain features of experience as attention-attraction: “On the present account, a sound-experience is just hearing sound, whether or not a sound-stimulus is present, and it is not identical with listening.”⁶⁶ Experience as attention-attraction does not logically entail the external existence of that which a person experiences. They might be deceived or dreaming concerning what they hear. Furthermore, experience as attention-attraction need not involve a person voluntarily directing their attention. Hearing is distinguished from listening. Finally, a person can hear before they categorize. For instance, the question “What was that?” remains unanswered if their attention is immediately diverted by a second perceptual experience. Indeed, “the given [perceptual experience] is one thing, and one’s interpretation of it, something else.”⁶⁷

With these qualifications in place, Moser identifies *immediate awareness* in experience as a “mental pointing to, or focusing of attention on, some occurrent appearance, sensation, or psychological state.”⁶⁸ Such immediate awareness, as immediate, lacks any propositional or conceptual relations to the object of a person’s

⁶⁵ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 81.

⁶⁶ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 163.

⁶⁷ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 193.

⁶⁸ Moser, *Empirical Justification*, 161.

awareness.⁶⁹ Immediate awareness, whether perceptual or nonperceptual, concerns the *nonconceptual* contents of a person's subjective perspective that attract their attention.

Given the subjective nonconceptual contents in experience, how do those contents justify foundational propositions? Recall that, for Moser, epistemic justification requires evidence that a proposition is true. More specifically, justification requires evidence that renders a proposition more probable than its competitors (and not merely more probable than its denial).⁷⁰ Moser construes the needed notion of evidential probability in terms of explanatory power. Evidence renders somewhat probable those propositions that somewhat explain it. This remains so when the evidence is found in experience. Accordingly, the subjective nonconceptual contents in a person's experience render probable, to some extent, propositions that explain, to some extent, why those contents present themselves as they do.⁷¹ Propositions that explain a person's nonpropositional experience are justified by the experience that they explain. In this way, the justification of propositional knowledge traces back to foundational propositions that best explain a person's experiential evidence. Epistemic justification begins with nonconceptual experience.

Not just any evidence can justify a proposition. Evidence renders probable that which explains it. This probability is in proportion to the explanatory power of the proposition over the evidence. Weak explanations receive weak justification from the

⁶⁹ Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 186.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

evidence they weakly explain. Epistemic justification, however, requires an *adequate* indication that a proposition is true and not merely a weak indication. The adequacy in question concerns explanatory power. *Justifying evidence* for a proposition, unlike weak evidence, renders that proposition a better explanation of the justifying evidence than every competing explanation.⁷² Moser construes explanations as answers to *why-questions*, questions concerning why these particular subjective nonconceptual contents occur as they do rather than other possible contents. The relative power of an explanation depends on how many why-questions it answers, how few entities it invokes that are unconstrained by the evidence, and whether it logically entails various competing explanations without being entailed by them.⁷³

Of note, better explanations are not necessarily simpler explanations. A simpler explanation may answer less why-questions than a more complex one.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Moser construes epistemic importance in terms of explanatory power. Beliefs with greater explanatory power are of greater importance for truth-seekers.⁷⁵ Moser therefore recommends that truth-seekers seek out the best available explanations of their foundational evidence in subjective experience.⁷⁶

We now have the evidential feature before us in outline, although a great many more qualifications and clarifications could be added. The justification needed for

⁷² Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 151.

⁷³ Ibid., 98-99.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 220.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 224.

knowledge requires evidence. Such evidence justifies that which best explains it. Although one proposition can be evidence for another, the chain of evidence always begins with the subjective nonconceptual contents of a person's experience. Perspective-bound truth-seekers should seek the best available explanations of their subjective nonconceptual experience.

The three features of Paul Moser's philosophy described above outline his framework for inquiry in general. The perspectival feature clarifies the predicament of human inquirers as perspective-bound. The intentional meaning feature of his philosophy determines what is analytic for a person in terms of their purpose-relative, and therefore perspectival, interpretive commitments and semantic standards toward linguistic tokens and concepts. Finally, the evidential feature of Moser's philosophy identifies the foundational evidence needed for justified belief as a person's experienced subjective nonconceptual contents. Taken together, truth-seekers seek the objective truth behind their subjective experience. As perspective-bound, they do so via seeking subjective epistemic justification for their beliefs, namely by crafting explanations for their perspectival experience in terms of purpose-relative notions and language. This portrait of inquiry in general bears on inquiry about whether God is triune and the epistemic status of such belief. However, before addressing trinitarian matters, we first consider Paul Moser's *ethics* for inquiry about God and his notion of cognitive idolatry.

CHAPTER THREE

COGNITIVE IDOLATRY AND ETHICS FOR THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Having examined Paul Moser's account of inquiry, we now turn to inquiry about God. Theological inquiry, like all inquiry, must proceed according to the nature of its object.¹ Given a concept of God, we ask what sort of evidence in experience we would expect of such a God. When inquiry concerns a God who is worthy of worship, Moser insists that the foundational evidence in experience would consist of God's self-manifestation as conviction leading toward transformation. Such inquiry about God becomes morally rigorous and existentially challenging. Yet when inquirers refuse to know God on God's morally demanding terms they succumb to cognitive idolatry. An ethics for inquiry about God guides inquirers away from cognitive idolatry toward a type of truth-seeking that suits God's purposes in being known.

God as Worthy of Worship

Different people mean different things by the term God and Paul Moser clarifies his own meaning early and often in his writing.² Moser uses the term God as a *title* (rather than a proper name) requiring worthiness of worship on the part of the one who bears it.

¹ John Oman, "Method in Theology," *The Expositor* 26 (1923): 82.

² See Paul K. Moser, *The God Relationship: Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), 117-119 for details about his notion of "God."

To qualify as God, a being must be *worthy* of worship. Merely receiving worship does not make one God.³ Idols also receive worship. God, unlike idols, would be worthy of any worship God receives. Yet why use the term God in this morally demanding way rather than in some other way? “We can lower the bar later if we wish,” Moser grants, but inquiry about God (generally construed) ought to include a search for a God who is worthy of worship.⁴ Should that search prove fruitless, that is, should the title God lack a title-bearer, we are free to inquire about some lesser title. Nevertheless, truth-seekers “should be conceptually open to this kind of God from the start, even if we find the supporting evidence inadequate in the end.”⁵

Moser’s deliberate use of the term God comports with the intentional meaning feature of his philosophy. His decision to use the term God as a title denoting worthiness of worship is an *interpretive commitment* on his part toward that term. Given this commitment, it becomes incorrect for Moser to use the term God to describe any being that does not merit our worship, even if others do so. Moser thereby allows for *conceptual relativism* about the term God. That is, different people mean different things by God. Moser uses the term in his own way and is free to do so. Therefore, much of what Moser says about God is *analytically true* for him, true in virtue of what he means by his terms.

One reason Moser uses the term God as he does is to speak with agnostics about God without begging their questions about God’s existence. In his writing, Moser “does

³ Paul K. Moser, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 23.

⁴ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

not simply assume that the claim that God exists is true or even justified,” but instead writes about “what God would be or would do (if God exists).” Moser thereby develops conceptually necessary expectations for God. These expectations are true in virtue of what God would do given what Moser means by the term God. Agnostics (and theologians of various persuasions) can, in principle, share Moser’s notion of God and expectations for God without agreeing about whether this God exists. “Each person, however, will need to discern if the expectations in question are satisfied in his or her own experience. This is part of the irreducibly existential, person-oriented nature of faith in God.”⁶

This procedure ought not to be confused with an ontological argument from natural theology. Moser’s notion of God does not include necessary existence. God’s existence would be a brute fact, Moser suggests, rather than an ontological necessity.⁷ The conceptually necessary features of God are only necessary in virtue of what Moser means by God. Only perspectival evidence can indicate whether God is as Moser describes. By his conceptual commitments, Moser both welcomes skeptics in dialogue and challenges inquirers to discern in their own experience whether such a God exists.

Worthiness of Worship and Relationships

“Let’s say that a being is worthy of worship,” Moser writes, “if and only if that being, having inherent moral perfection, merits worship as unqualified adoration, love,

⁶ Moser, *The God Relationship*, xi.

⁷ Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (2008; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88-89.

trust, and obedience.”⁸ What or who could be worthy in this sense? What sort of evidence would they supply? Moser insists that none can qualify as worthy of worship on account of mere power. Unqualified trust, for instance, is only well placed when directed toward one who is fully trustworthy. Power and trustworthiness, however, are distinct notions. “No big bad bully, therefore, will qualify as being God just in virtue of strength, power, or even omnipotence.”⁹ God must instead qualify as God, namely as worthy of worship, on *moral* grounds. Only a “morally perfect agent whose perfection is inherent” is worthy of unqualified trust.¹⁰ Others merit, at best, trust with qualifications.

Moral perfection can be construed in various ways. In general, Moser observes, it involves both *individual* and *relational* elements.¹¹ In addition to God’s individual moral perfection, God must practice relational moral perfection toward all other people. Relational moral perfection “requires one’s seeking what is morally best for all concerned.”¹² What, then, is morally best for all people? Moral perfection, naturally enough, is morally best. A God who seeks the moral best for all others would therefore promote their moral perfection.¹³ That humans do not, in fact, practice relational moral perfection is an empirical matter. That is, we can verify in experience that humans

⁸ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 23; cf. *The Elusive God*, 32; *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

(ourselves included) do not perfectly seek what is morally best for one another. This amounts to either implicit or explicit rejection of God's moral character. A God of relational moral perfection would therefore have a *redemptive purpose* toward all humans, including God's enemies. On account of this purpose, "God, then, is not to be confused with the kind of evil being called 'Satan'."¹⁴ Indeed, if God did not seek the moral best for God's enemies, then God would not be worthy of *their* trust and obedience. Lacking relational moral perfection, God would not be God.

Using more familiar biblical language, Moser construes righteousness as perfect moral goodness, including both individual and relational elements. A righteous God, then, would promote the righteousness of all others, seeking to instill in them God's righteous character of love toward all others, including enemies. This divine purpose involves transforming humans at the level of their will, so that they willingly embrace and manifest God's righteous character. God cannot coerce such transformation. "If God extinguished human wills, humans themselves would be extinguished as candidates for genuine moral relationships and companionship with God, thus undermining God's redemptive purposes."¹⁵ God must therefore redeem without coercion, since a coerced redemption is no redemption at all where redemption redeems relationships.

Moser insists that his conceptual portrait of God and God's purposes does not assume a Christian theology.¹⁶ Rather, it is a conceptual analysis of worthiness of worship

¹⁴ Moser, *The Severity of God*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ Paul K. Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology: Volitional and Evidential," *Philosophia Christi* 14, no. 2 (2012): 265-266.

in terms of relational moral perfection, broadly construed. Even so, this portrait of a God who loves enemies is similar to a broad New Testament portrait of God. Moser recasts his notion of God as worthy of worship using the biblical Greek terms *agapē* and *koinonia*. Moser labels the kind of love that a God worthy of worship would both practice and promote as *agapē*. Such love is “unselfish, compassionate love that seeks what is best, all things considered, for others, even for one’s enemies.”¹⁷ A God of *agapē* would strive to “to have mutual *agapē* relationships between God and every human and between all humans who interact, for the benefit of all concerned.” Moser then labels these “*agapē*-centered relationships” as “*koinonia* relationships.” He uses the term *koinonia* to connote “cooperation, amity, harmony, peace, fellowship, sincere communication, kindness, mercy, empathy, and sympathy as compassion, in a good relationship.” So described, a God who is worthy of worship would strive to have humans “imitate God’s moral character in personal *koinonia* relationships.”¹⁸ Such a God has purposes for both individuals and groups of people, namely that they would love God and one another.

Personal Knowledge and Evidence

Suppose that God, as worthy of worship, would promote redeemed *agapē* based *koinonia* relationships with and among humans. If so, we must allow this divine purpose to shape our expectations for the evidence needed to know God. The perspectival feature of Moser’s philosophy identifies the perspective-bound nature of human inquiry. The evidential feature places the foundational evidence needed for knowledge within a person’s

¹⁷ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

nonconceptual subjective experiences. When perspective-bound inquiry concerns a God who is worthy of worship, the foundational evidence in experience must comport with God's character and purposes.

If humans need, above all, clarity *about* God, then surely God would provide sufficient public evidence to put all doubt to rest. However, if humans instead need cooperative transformation by God so that they embrace and manifest God's righteous love, then God would reveal himself in a manner that meets this deeper human need. Indeed, the sort of public evidence that might put all doubt about God to rest is distinct from evidence that promotes *agapē* centred *koinonia* relationships with God and among humans. God would not promote accurate propositional knowledge about God at the expense of personal knowledge of God's character. Neither should we construe the evidence for God as foremost suited to detailed knowledge about God.

If God, as worthy of worship, seeks to reconcile humans to himself in *koinonia* relationship, and reconcile humans to each other in *koinonia* relationships, then God must confront humans with God's character of *agapē*. God must do so with wisdom and without coercion. What humans need most, then, is personal knowledge of God and God's character, both as an experience of God's love and an experienced challenge to embrace God's love for oneself and toward others. This leads to a crucial distinction:

Aiming to be known directly as a personal agent, God would value *interpersonal interaction* of a direct, second-person sort. Such interpersonality is *de re*, or more accurately *de te* (from the Latin "tu" = "you"), involving direct acquaintance of one personal agent with another personal agent in the second person, beyond any *de dicto* (conceptual or notional) relation involving ideas or principles.¹⁹

¹⁹ Moser, *The Severity of God*, 44, emphasis original.

With this distinction in hand, we should expect a God who is worthy of worship to cultivate *de re* personal encounter (an I-Thou encounter), even to the neglect of *de dicto* knowledge about God (an I-It relation) when needed. This would be so even if humans are initially incapable of I-Thou encounter with God in virtue of rejecting God's character. God would need to cultivate and cooperatively produce a capacity to know God in the second person. Moser discerns in the New Testament an epistemology that makes this needed distinction. "The basis of proper knowledge of God," according to Jesus in the Gospels, "is consciousness of one's standing in a child-parent, or filial, relationship to God as righteously gracious Father."²⁰ So understood, knowledge of God comes at the price of allowing God to cultivate *koinonia* relationships with oneself and between oneself and others. "We come to know God only as he becomes our God, our Lord as Father of our lives, rather than just an object of our contemplation, convenience, or amusement."²¹

We ought, therefore, to expect of a God worthy of worship evidence that promotes personal reconciliation rather than evidence that does not. We ought not, therefore, to expect *spectator evidence* from God, namely "evidence pointing to some truth but *not* demanding that its recipients yield their wills to (the will of) the source of the evidence."²² Such evidence would not serve God's purposes, although many humans prefer it. Instead, God would prefer *authoritative evidence*, namely "evidence demanding that we yield our wills to (the will of) the divine source of the evidence in question."²³ Inquiry about God,

²⁰ Paul K. Moser, "Jesus on Knowledge of God," *Christian Scholar's Review* 28, no. 4 (1999): 594.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 597.

²² Moser, *The Elusive God*, 46, emphasis original.

²³ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

in turn, may proceed in one of two modes: *obedience mode* or *discussion mode*.²⁴ Those who inquire in obedience mode receive authoritative evidence as those willing to obey its source. Those who inquire in discussion mode respond to authority with perpetual discussion at the expense of obedience. Inquirers who prefer discussion mode prefer spectator evidence. A redemptive God, however, would prefer obedience mode and would offer authoritative evidence.

Divine Self-Manifestation in Experience as Conviction

What then is the nature of authoritative evidence that promotes personal knowledge of God in obedience mode? Moser suggests that “God wants to anchor all of divine self-revelation to humans in a first-person human perspective that includes a *de re* encounter with God.”²⁵ Moser characterizes such an I-Thou encounter as a personal self-manifestation of God’s character of righteous love. This divine self-manifestation would be a religious experience of a specific nature.

Moser characterizes the relevant experience as a “*de re agent-to-agent acquaintance* of the human with God’s call.”²⁶ This divine call invites humans to embrace God’s righteous love and welcome transformation. It involves an “I-Thou confrontation of human and divine personal wills,” otherwise known as a “volitional confrontation” or an experience of noncoercive “volitional pressure.”²⁷ So characterized, the experience of

²⁴ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 222.

²⁵ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 311.

²⁶ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 182, emphasis original.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

direct acquaintance with God involves involuntary, pre-conceptual attention-attraction in perspective. It does not logically entail that God exists or is actually self-manifesting, just as the experience of hearing a sound is compatible with dreaming or being mistaken about its source. Neither is this experience voluntary. As attention-attraction, God *intrudes* in human experience with a volitional challenge prior any human response, that is, regardless of whether one attends to the challenge or ignores it. Finally, the experience is pre-conceptual inasmuch as it precedes description or conceptualization. A person need not have any notion of God whatsoever to be challenged by God in experience.

Moser describes this experience as *divine corrective inquiry*. The inquirer finds that “he or she is being correctively inquired of by God as God’s will emerges as a challenge in human conscience.” This experience consists of “a challenge to embrace cooperative dependence on God and to relinquish human self-sufficiency before God.”²⁸ Given that God’s purposes require human freedom, humans can effectively either *empower* or *disable* God from further self-manifestation by their response.²⁹ Human cooperation with divine corrective inquiry can lead to *divine corrective reciprocity*, which “includes not just a person’s knowing God but God’s knowing that person correctively in virtue of challenging that person in conscience and being cooperatively received (and perhaps even consistently obeyed) *as God* by that person.”³⁰ Divine corrective inquiry precedes divine

²⁸ Moser, *The Severity of God*, 89-90.

²⁹ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 15-21.

³⁰ Moser, *The Severity of God*, 89, emphasis original.

corrective reciprocity since “God’s receptive invitation of *agapē* strikes first, always prior to any human response.”³¹ Yet human cooperation remains essential.

Moser depicts this experience, more precisely, as being *convicted by agapē*. This conviction, as an experience of attention-attraction, is not a proposition or sentence. Moser does not mean, by conviction, persistent belief since persistent belief “need not include an intrusion from volitional pressure on an agent that appears not to be of the agent’s own making or doing.” Rather, “the experience would include being convicted as being challenged, and thus being intruded upon, in conscience to cooperate with the source of the conviction, in loving others unselfishly, even one’s enemies.” Just as a person can experience conviction about sin, “there also can be convicting a person as challenging, and thus intruding upon, that person toward righteousness, including righteous love.” Although initially involuntary, a person could resist conviction as attention-attraction. They would simply need to reject the moral intrusion as unwanted. “Indeed, a lament from numerous Biblical writers is that God’s effort to convict God’s people is opposed by them.”³²

As Moser construes it, conviction amounts to “the sense of being loved by a supreme being and nudged uncoercively by that being toward loving others.”

In being convicted by God, one would face the basis of an *indicative* and of an *imperative*: the basis of a *gift* and of a *duty*. The basis of an indicative or a gift would be the experienced presence of divine love for oneself (and others), and the basis of an imperative or a duty would be the experienced volitional pressure on one toward loving others, even enemies, as God does. This *twofold basis* could

³¹ Moser, *The Severity of God*, 90.

³² Paul K. Moser, “Divine Hiddenness, Agapē Conviction, and Spiritual Discernment,” in *Sensing Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception*, ed. Frederick Aquino and Paul Gavrilyuk (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

serve as one's experiential foundation for not only a theology but also a theological ethics (among other things).³³

The foundational evidence needed for theology, Moser suggests here, is an experienced direct acquaintance with God. Inquirers ought to seek God's self-manifestation at the level of conviction to receive God's love and, in turn, love as God loves. The needed foundational evidence for theology must be precisely that which promotes *agapē* centred *koinonia* relationships with God and others.

Moser also describes the experience of direct acquaintance with God as "our evident experience of willingly receiving God's Spirit."³⁴ It is an experience of "being cooperatively convicted in being led by God [via God's Spirit] toward loving others."³⁵ This experience would be *diachronic* since it would involve ongoing conviction and transformation rather than happening all at once.³⁶ Furthermore, discrete experiences of divine conviction and cooperative transformation would occur within a "God relationship," that is, "an enduring dispositional state irreducible to discrete experiences, thoughts, feelings, or actions."³⁷ Indeed, an ongoing relationship with God can include experiences of both direct acquaintance with God and godforsakenness. In light of the godforsaken experience of Jesus, Moser observes that "a present *experience* of God is secondary to something else: namely, a loving *relationship* with God, which may or may

³³ Moser, "Divine Hiddenness, Agapē Conviction, and Spiritual Discernment," emphasis added.

³⁴ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 199.

³⁵ Moser, "Divine Hiddenness, Agapē Conviction, and Spiritual Discernment."

³⁶ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 317.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

not include a present experience of God.”³⁸ God’s self-manifestation in experience aims at establishing an enduring “*koinonia* relationship irreducible to present experiences, thoughts, feelings, or actions regarding God.”³⁹ Finally, humans can easily misinterpret or overlook God’s self-manifestation for various reasons. They may, for instance, “unreflectively think of perfect unselfish love as just another *natural* human capacity, akin to vision, speech, and taste.”⁴⁰ Or perhaps they may presume that “conclusive evidence and knowledge of God’s reality, if they are available at all, could be acquired by us without our receiving an authoritative challenge to participate in the kind of perfect unselfish love characteristic of God.”⁴¹ Given God’s redemptive purposes in being known, those who seek God apart from the self-manifestation of God’s righteous love seek in vain.

Ethics for Inquiry about God

So far we have seen how a God who is worthy of worship would have specific purposes in being known. God would promote *agapē* centred *koinonia* relationships with God and others. We have also seen that the foundational evidence provided by God would be a perspectival self-manifestation of God’s righteous love that challenges humans to respond in turn. God would offer this evidence to people at times and places of God’s choosing, just as those hoping to establish a friendship introduce themselves with care. If humans welcome God’s intrusions in conscience, they enable God to self-manifest in more

³⁸ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 81, emphasis original.

³⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁰ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 203, emphasis original.

⁴¹ Ibid., 204.

salient ways, moving from God's overtures into reciprocal fellowship. Being transformed, willing humans themselves manifest God's character of righteous love to others. On this account, Moser insists that God grants humans a major role in enabling God to self-manifest. Inquirers must therefore comport with an *ethics of inquiry* about God.

Suitably Seeking God's Self-Manifestation

Given God's purposes in self-manifestation, Moser warns us to "not assume that evidence of God is equally realized among humans."⁴² Evidence for God is available to those who seek it according to God's purposes and otherwise beyond reach. Accordingly, Moser proposes an ethics for inquiry about God based upon a "twofold base principle":

Given an opportunity, a person should inquire about God's reality, owing at least to the potential for supreme moral benefit in apprehending perfect divine goodness; and an inquirer about God should put himself or herself in a good position to receive available salient evidence of God's reality and perfect goodness.⁴³

This twofold base principle articulates how God's purposes in being known are at odds with human insouciance or hostility toward knowing God. God is available to all who seek God, who value God's overtures rather than spurn or neglect them. Those who value God's self-manifestation should position themselves to receive it. Moser's ethics for inquiry about God therefore begins with one's seeking God where God may be found. He continues with three "core sub-principles" that clarify what counts as a "good position" to enable and receive God's self-manifestation:

1. Inquiry about God should include an inquirer's *self-reflective candor* about his or her moral standing relative to what would be God's morally perfect character.

⁴² Moser, *The God Relationship*, 282.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 88.

2. Inquiry about God should include an inquirer's *intending to conform* sympathetically to God's morally perfect will upon receiving salient evidence of God's will (including evidence from uncoercive pressure in conscience on one's will toward perfect goodness).
3. Inquiry about God should include an inquirer's *seeking evidence* for God and perfect divine goodness, and not just one's waiting for it to come to one.⁴⁴

The first principle requires that inquirers reflect upon their need of redemption and moral transformation, given the empirical difference between how they actually treat their enemies and the standard of relational moral perfection. To this end, Moser argues, God can be morally overwhelming at times, provoking a person to "to reconsider the overall moral direction or purpose of his or her life, relative to *agapē* (unselfish love) in personal relationships."⁴⁵ Moral self-sufficiency is a perennial obstacle to knowing God on God's terms, that is, as morally dependent upon God. The second principle requires that inquirers proceed in obedience mode. The foundational evidence of theological inquiry is foremost "a means to intentional sympathetic conformity with God's moral character by humans."⁴⁶ Unless it is welcomed, God's self-manifestation is limited to mere intrusions in conscience. It then lacks the salience of divine-human reciprocity. The third principle requires moving beyond indifference or resistance toward God's self-manifestation. Inquirers must *seek out* further available evidence of God's self-manifestation rather than merely reflect on the evidence they have.⁴⁷ Theological inquiry, on this third principle, cannot settle for mere analysis of texts or tradition when the one thing needful is God's morally disturbing self-

⁴⁴ *The God Relationship*, 88, emphasis original.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58; cf. 56-115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 145-161.

manifestation in human experience. Inquirers who appreciate their need and who aim to receive from God must also pursue God's self-manifestation where it may be found.

Cognitive Idolatry in Theological Inquiry

Many inquirers would prefer to know about God without attending to God's available self-manifestation and its associated ethics for inquiry. Put another way, many seek knowledge about God for reasons other than receiving and conforming to God's character of *agapē* and establishing *koinonia* relationships with God and others. Such inquiry is inquiry at odds with God's purposes in being known, whatever other purpose may guide it. Parents can hide themselves from children who seek to manipulate or control them, so that their children would instead come to know their parents as loving providers. Likewise, God seeks to be known as a perfectly loving and authoritative Lord. Where human and divine purposes in inquiry diverge, human inquiry succumbs to cognitive idolatry.⁴⁸ "Idolatry is, at bottom, not letting the true, perfectly authoritative and loving God be Lord in our lives." Cognitive idolatry, in turn, is when "we deny, if implicitly, God's supreme authority in commending ways of knowing God's reality."⁴⁹

Cognitive idolatry can take several forms, each of which "exploits epistemological standards, if implicitly, to refuse to let God be supremely authoritative in a person's life, initially in the cognitive area of life."⁵⁰ For instance, on the intentional meaning feature of

⁴⁸ Moser develops his notion of cognitive idolatry in *The Elusive God*, 101f; "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in *Divine Hiddenness : New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 120–148; and "God and Epistemic Authority," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 14, no. 2 (2015): 414–424.

⁴⁹ Moser, *The Elusive God*, 101-102.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Moser's philosophy, the concepts and language that inquirers use are irreducibly purpose relative. Inquirers who do not wish to be challenged or transformed by *agapē* will inevitably frame their theological inquiry so as to avoid being morally challenged. Their working notion of God may be such that God can be known apart from an authoritative challenge to human inquirers. Such is the fate of natural theology, which explicitly brackets God's self-manifestation in theological inquiry. The problem, however, is not confined to natural theology. Any theological program that lacks or rejects God's personal self-manifestation as the foundation for theological knowledge neglects God's purposes in being known, if God is worthy of worship, and either risks or succumbs to cognitive idolatry.

The possible variants of cognitive idolatry are legion. Given our prior treatment of the evidential feature of Moser's philosophy, we may partially classify cognitive idolatry in terms of the epistemic regress problem. Suppose that God's purposes in being known make knowledge of God dependent upon foundational nonpropositional, pre-conceptual direct acquaintance with God in experience. Solutions to the epistemic regress problem that reject experiential foundations are then amenable to cognitive idolatry.

For instance, a coherentist approach to knowledge of God would justify propositions about God apart from any experiential foundation. Instead, this approach justifies beliefs about God *merely* via their coherence with other beliefs about God. Although a best explanation of experience will be coherent, mere coherence can be a cognitive idol. A coherent story is not the story of God's self-manifestation unless it explains, to some extent, God's overtures and reciprocity in a person's moral experience.

Likewise, cognitive idolatry includes attempts to justify beliefs about God using unjustified foundations. One such attempt involves appeal to social consensus about God, perhaps as an appeal to tradition or orthodoxy. Even if a theological belief is in fact justified for others, it is unjustified for us unless we have the needed foundational evidence in experience. Children may believe their parents, but as they mature they must believe for themselves, that is, on the basis of their own experience of God's Spirit. Perpetual mimicry in belief, apart from pursuing the needed direct acquaintance with God, is cognitive idolatry. This includes simply adopting the beliefs of biblical authors without sharing in their foundational direct acquaintance with God.⁵¹ Social consensus in theology, across time and space, requires a common experience of God's self-manifestation yielding "intersubjective evidence" for the consensus.⁵² Consensus alone, like coherence alone, succumbs to cognitive idolatry.

Even appeals to justified foundations for knowledge can succumb to cognitive idolatry when the foundations in question neglect direct acquaintance with God. For instance, reliabilist approaches to knowledge about God require that foundational beliefs are produced by allegedly reliable processes or obtained from allegedly reliable sources. On one species of reliabilism, the Bible is construed as the reliable source of foundational justified beliefs. Other species say the same of tradition or church leaders. Taken to an extreme, reliabilism construes various sources as infallible or inerrant. In any case,

⁵¹ Paul K. Moser, "Response from the Conformation Model," in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 114.

⁵² Moser, *The God Relationship*, 312.

reliabilism directs attention away from God's self-manifestation toward an allegedly reliable source of true belief, such as, for instance, biblical statements about God obtained via some historical-critical method or traditional religious beliefs. To sum up, anything of value in inquiry, obtained while neglecting the experience of God's self-manifestation, can serve as a cognitive idol.

Toward a Theology of Divine Self-Manifestation

We have now examined Paul Moser's epistemology, notion of God, account of God's self-manifestation in experience, ethics for inquiry about God, and notion of cognitive idolatry. Taken together, these elements contribute to a framework for theology as truth-seeking inquiry about God dependent upon God's self-manifestation.

On the perspectival feature of Moser's philosophy, human inquiry about God is inescapably perspective-bound. Inquirers cannot test for the reliability of their belief-forming sources, at least not without a circular appeal to the very sources under scrutiny. If knowledge requires such a test, then we lack knowledge. Any theology that ultimately depends upon the reliability of allegedly reliable belief forming sources will wage "losing battles against agnostics."⁵³ Theology must instead draw upon the best and only support humans actually have: perspectival or person relative support.

Indeed, a God who is worthy of worship would carefully confront individual inquirers in perspective, challenging people at the level of their will with God's own character of righteous love, promoting *agapē* based *koinonia* relationships with God and

⁵³ Paul K. Moser, *Philosophy after Objectivity: Making Sense in Perspective* (1993; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58-59; cf. 5, 17.

between humans. On the evidential feature of Moser's philosophy, the justification needed for knowledge ultimately depends on such subjective nonconceptual experiences.

Theological knowledge, accordingly, requires perspectival experience of God's self-manifestation for its justification. Moser's ethics for inquiry about God aim to enable God to self-manifest to a person by aligning their purposes in inquiry with God's purposes in being known. A person can lack a clear concept of God yet know God on account of God's self-manifestation. Personal knowledge can outpace theology as knowledge about God. Theology, however, cannot outpace personal knowledge of God without being reduced to speculation. God remains unknown apart from foundational evidence in experience. The testimony of others, although important, is no substitute for knowing on the basis of one's own experience. Without the needed evidence, a person can have true belief about God, but such belief would lack the justification needed for knowledge.

So understood, theology is at bottom a matter of explaining or interpreting God's self-manifestation in experience, including shared intersubjective experiences with others.⁵⁴ On the intentional meaning feature of Moser's philosophy, the concepts and language that we use to explain our experience are, like the experience itself, sensitive to our purposes as inquirers. If linguistic meaning depends on nonextraneous interpretation, as Moser insists, then we must share (or at least understand) the interpretive commitments of others to grasp their meaning. Humans seeking knowledge about God ultimately seek God's meaning in self-manifestation to themselves and others. To fully grasp God's meaning, we must interpret our experience as God does. This is only possible when our

⁵⁴ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 312.

purposes in inquiry align with God's purposes in being known. Theological inquirers must adjust their concepts and interpretive commitments accordingly.

Taken together, we see that Moser's epistemology and concern to avoid cognitive idolatry yield a standard for epistemic justification in theology. Namely, theological belief cannot be justified for inquirers based on social consensus, systematic coherence, or allegedly reliable authority, but instead may be justified for them only insofar as it explains God's self-manifestation in their own experience using categories and interpretive commitments that comport with God's redemptive purposes in being known. Before turning to the doctrine of the Trinity with this standard for theological epistemic justification in hand we must briefly address a likely concern.

The Fundamental Dispute about I-Thou Encounter and Selfhood

Most controversy over Moser's framework will stem from his insistence upon an I-Thou encounter, rather than something else (like Bible, tradition, church, or even some other experience), as normative for inquiry about God. As Moser describes I-Thou encounter, it presupposes a *cooperative* role for humans in their relationship with God and firmly rejects the idea that God would simply reconcile humans via sovereign fiat or in some other monergist scheme. In so doing, Moser introduces a *parity* of sorts between God and humans, on which both God and humans exercise their wills and relate as beings capable of mutual address. Is this parity appropriate relative to various theological standards? Does it violate the creator-creature distinction or encroach upon divine sovereignty, as some construe these? Yes, according to some theological standards, it does.

Better to ask, then, Is this parity actual? Is God actually available to humans via I-Thou encounter or not? Moser is free, given the intentional meaning feature of his philosophy, to set forth his notion of God and analytic expectations for I-Thou encounter as a theology to be tested in experience. This “test theology” deserves a practical trial, and theologians who reject it without empirical reason effectively reject Moser’s foundational interpretive commitment that God ought to be worthy of worship, worship meaning unqualified trust, obedience, and adoration. That is their prerogative, but will prove to be cognitive idolatry if Moser is right and I-Thou encounter is in fact normative. Theological objectors, if they are truth-seekers, should defer to the empirical evidence potentially available in Christian experience.

Another concern may be that Moser’s approach seems to render the Christian faith individualistic, since the parity in question may exalt the individual inappropriately. Yet must the needed notion of self be individualistic, that is, inordinately concerned with a (perhaps modern) notion of the individual? Martin Buber, who coined the phrase “I-Thou,” regards the self as transformed by relationships, especially with God. The I in relation to an It is distinct, for Buber, from the I in relation to a Thou.⁵⁵ As such, “The word *I* is the true shibboleth of mankind.”⁵⁶ What we mean by I reveals whether we stand in I-Thou or I-It relationships to God and other people. Even if the individualistic I of I-It relations is anathema in certain theological quarters, the I of I-Thou relationships can remain above reproach. Perhaps sinful humans only become true selves, in the I-Thou

⁵⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (1937; repr., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950), 62. I use this older translation because it retains the phrase “I-Thou” rather than the recent “I-You.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65; cf. 69.

sense, through growth in I-Thou fellowship with God and others. Humans then need not exalt a sinful selfhood, defined perhaps by misplaced I-It relations, in order to encounter God. Rather, God could form true selfhood in cooperative humans, this selfhood defined by their *agapē* governed *koinonia* I-Thou relationship with God and others. Moser's I-Thou approach can therefore address concerns about individualism.

Some will object that all language about God is strictly metaphorical and any notion of self that applies to a human cannot, strictly speaking, also apply to God. "If God is addressed as He or It, it is always allegorically," Buber admits. "But if we say *Thou* to Him, then mortal sense has set the unbroken truth of the world into a word."⁵⁷ On Moser's approach, the Thou of I-Thou encounter describes our experience of reciprocal encounter with another will. This second person experience is what we *mean* by God as another self. In such encounter, "true address receives true response."⁵⁸

Last, the I-Thou approach is distinct from various approaches to religious experience as absolute dependence. Without denying Schleiermacher's insight, Buber observes that I-Thou encounter adds to it an experienced *reciprocity* with God. "Wishing to understand the pure relationship as dependence," without reciprocity, "means wishing to deactualize one partner of the relationship and thus the relationship itself."⁵⁹ Again, each inquirer must put the relevant divine-human reciprocity to an experimental test in their own life, regardless of potential theological offense.

⁵⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 99, emphasis original.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (1970; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 131. This second translation is clearer on this point.

CHAPTER FOUR

A PNEUMATIC APPROACH TO THE TRINITY

Having delineated Paul Moser's epistemology and theological method in the previous chapters, we now turn from *exposition* to *application*. This chapter does not attempt to discern Moser's own construal of the doctrine of the Trinity—at present, he has written very little directly about it. Instead we ask, How can Moser's pneumatic, evidential, and volitional approach to theology guide inquiry about the doctrine of the Trinity? We proceed by engaging various theological writers selected to illustrate Moser's experiential approach as it would apply to inquiry about the Trinity. Our guiding principle, drawn from Moser's epistemology and theological method, will be that when inquiry concerns a God worthy of worship, theology is a matter of explaining and interpreting God's purposeful self-manifestation in experience. So understood, inquiry about the doctrine of the Trinity must begin—rather than merely conclude—with the Holy Spirit in experience.

We first examine the role of mystery and conceptual commitments in various accounts of the Trinity, drawing primarily upon both the intentional meaning feature of Moser's philosophy and his concern to incorporate I-Thou encounter by God's Spirit in any theology adequate to explain Christian experience. Next, we explore how the Christian experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus serves as the foundational evidence that an account of the Trinity must explain. This exploration draws primarily upon the perspectival and evidential features of Moser's philosophy as well as his concern for God's

self-manifestation by God's Spirit. Finally, we discuss the problem of mythology, namely, that of translating the ancient Christian proclamation or *kerygma* into modern terms. We conclude that no notions or conceptual commitments can comport with God's purposes in being known outside of fellowship with God's Spirit. Cognitive idolatry, then, is a risk for any construal of the Trinity pursued apart from the needed ethics for inquiry. Taken together, this chapter proposes that Paul Moser's theological method demands a pneumatic approach to the Trinity, on which no one can believe that God is triune, in an adequate sense and with epistemic justification, except by the Holy Spirit.

Mystery and Conceptual Commitments

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has a three-part history. First, there was a time when it was not. No biblical author describes the one God as triune or tripersonal. As Samuel Clarke observes, "The word, *God*, in Scripture, never signifies a complex notion of *more persons than one*; but always means *one person only*, viz. either the person of the *Father* singly, or the person of the *Son* singly."¹ Indeed, in the Christian scriptures, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of which there is one—is simply and precisely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.² Second, after a long period of development, upheaval, and transition, an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity emerged that, once established, was "assumed without much challenge from the close of the fourth

¹ Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (St. Paul's Church-Yard, London: Printed for James Knapton, 1712), 304, emphasis original; spelling and capitalization have been modernized.

² This is a major conclusion of Larry W. Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology*, The Library of Biblical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 31, 38, 47, 98, 101.

century to the dawn of the eighteenth.”³ Third, the orthodox general consensus concerning the Trinity dissolved in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Despite holding orthodox views about the Trinity, the Reformers drove a “wedge between creeds and Bible by insisting that the creeds are subject to inspection and criticism according to their agreement with the Bible.”⁴ Theological diversity characterizes this present third period, as various inquirers pursue various doctrines of the Trinity for various ends.⁵

Rather than analyzing the transitions from one period to the next, this section pursues a taxonomy of construals of the Trinity. We employ the intentional meaning feature of Moser’s philosophy to analyze the conceptual foundations of various construals of the Trinity. Since Moser’s theological method involves explaining a person’s experience of God’s self-manifestation, we insist on classifying construals of the Trinity in terms of how they incorporate a working notion of “self.” We conclude that Moser’s pneumatic

³ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 198. Holmes summarizes this doctrine as follows on p. 146:

1. The divine nature is simple, incomposite, and ineffable. It is also unrepeatable, and so, in crude and inexact terms, ‘one’. 2. Language referring to the divine nature is always inexact and tropic; nonetheless, if formulated with much care and more prayer, it might adequately, if not fully, refer. 3. There are three divine *hypostases* that are instantiations of the divine nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 4. The three divine *hypostases* exist really, eternally, and necessarily, and there is nothing divine that exists beyond or outside their existence. 5. The three divine *hypostases* are distinguished by eternal relations of origin—begetting and proceeding—but not otherwise. 6. All that is spoken of God, with the single and very limited exception of that language which refers to the relations of origin of the three *hypostases*, is spoken of the one life the three share, and so is indivisibly spoken of all three. 7. The relationships of origin express/establish relational distinctions between the three existent *hypostases*; no other distinctions are permissible.

Holmes insists that, on these points at least, there is “no fundamental difference between East and West.”

⁴ Samuel M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 22.

⁵ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 201, sharply distinguishes the recent so-called Trinitarian revival from orthodox Trinitarianism.

approach excludes impersonal, inconsistent, or unclear accounts of the Trinity while allowing for agnosticism as to which personalist account is true.

A Taxonomy of Accounts of the Trinity

Dale Tuggy characterizes the doctrine of the Trinity, generally construed, as “the statement that the one God exists as or in three equally divine ‘persons’, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” He notes, however, that “every significant concept in this statement (God, exists, as or in, equally divine, person) has been variously understood.”⁶ The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore subject to conceptual relativism, given that different people mean different things by it. This diversity is no surprise given the intentional meaning feature of Moser’s philosophy, on which linguistic meaning is sensitive to the varied purposes of language users and interpreters.

If, as Moser insists, a God worthy of worship would require that inquirers welcome God’s self-manifestation, and if this self-manifestation involves an I-Thou encounter in which God’s Spirit conveys the personal presence of self, then we must incorporate some serviceable notion of self into the doctrine of the Trinity. The notion we choose depends on our purposes in inquiry. If we want to explain an I-Thou experience via God’s Spirit then our notion of self must permit this. Dale Tuggy provides a nearly serviceable notion, defining a self as a “being which is in principle capable of knowledge, intentional action, and interpersonal relationships.”⁷ For our present purposes, we may adjust this notion

⁶ Dale Tuggy, “Trinity,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016), accessed November 30, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/trinity/>.

⁷ Ibid., sec. 1.1 “Selves, gods, and modes.”

slightly. We will construe a self as a being which is in principle capable of either (a) I-Thou encounter or (b) being made capable of I-Thou encounter. So defined, human beings are selves, although a self need not be a human being. Indeed, a divine-human I-Thou encounter requires both a divine self and a human self (as we have defined self). Furthermore, this definition does not rule out a creative work of God in making human beings capable of I-Thou encounter with God and one another. Just as Moser begins with his particular notion of God, we begin with this particular notion of a self. Others are free to proceed in parallel using different notions of self according to their own purposes in inquiry. We can let experience decide between notions in the end.

Selves, by definition, may be *counted* since the I-Thou relationship is distinct from the reflexive I-I relation. Speaking with another is distinct from speaking with oneself. Following Tuggy's method, we classify construals of the Trinity according to whether they depict the triune God as one self, three-selves, or neither, having construed a self as a being that is in principle capable of I-Thou encounter.⁸ One-self Trinitarians are conceptually committed to the notion that a God is a self, three-self Trinitarians to the notion that a divine person is a self. Accordingly, one-self Trinitarians construe the Trinity as one self, whereas three-self Trinitarians construe the Trinity as three selves. By the conceptual commitments of one-self proponents, three selves in the Trinity would mean three Gods. Likewise, for three-self proponents, one self in the Trinity would mean one divine person. Any dialogue between the one-self and three-self positions depends on either one-self Trinitarians making a case that the persons of the Trinity need not be

⁸ Tuggy, "Trinity," secs. 1-2. It is also possible to construe the Trinity as two selves by making one of the three persons, usually the Holy Spirit, a mode of another. For simplicity, we neglect this option.

construed as selves, or on three-self Trinitarians making a case that the one God need not be construed as one self. Given what is conceptually necessary to each position, one-self and three-self Trinitarians analytically cannot reach a conceptual accommodation. The truth lies with one, the other, or neither.

So far we have used a notion of absolute numerical identity in our statements. Absolute numerical identity a relation that each thing has to itself. That is, for any *A*, *A* is absolutely numerically identical to *A*. More succinctly: for any *A*, *A* is *A*. This relation is *transitive*, so that if *A* is *B* and *B* is *C* then *A* is *C*. If we construe the word “is” in terms of absolute numerical identity, then given what we mean by the statements “the Trinity is the one God” and “no divine person is the Trinity,” it follows analytically that “no divine person is the one God.” That is, it follows in virtue of what we mean by “the Trinity is the one God” and “no divine person is the Trinity.”

Some Trinitarians exchange *absolute* identity for *relative* identity in their statements about the Trinity. Relative identity statements take the form “*A* and *B* are the same *F*,” where *F* is a kind of thing that can be counted, known as a *sortal*.⁹ Using relative identity statements, a Trinitarian can say that the Father and the Son are the *same God* but *different divine persons*.¹⁰ In this statement, “God” and “divine person” are sortals and can be counted separately. So construed, there is one God and three divine persons, each divine person being the same God, in the *relative* (not absolute) sense.

⁹ On which, see Richard E. Grandy, “Sortals,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016), accessed January 7, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sortals/>.

¹⁰ Tuggy, “Trinity,” sec. 2.1 “Relative Identity Theories.”

This strategy is not actually a third way between one-self and three-self Trinitarianism. The notion of “self” can also serve as a countable sortal. The question is, Are the divine persons the same self or different selves? In one case, the relative identity approach is one-self Trinitarianism. In the other case, it is three-self Trinitarianism. So relative identity strategies do not avoid the one-self versus three-self dilemma facing Trinitarians. Furthermore, the relative identity approach cannot prevent us from asking questions posed in terms of absolute identity. It simply changes the topic. Using absolute identity, it is analytically false that each divine person is the one God yet there are three divine persons. This remains so even when some language users make statements using relative rather than absolute identity. We may therefore continue using absolute rather than relative identity in what follows.

Two approaches to the Trinity and selfhood remain. First, we might construe *neither* the one God *nor* the three persons as selves. Following Tuggy, we may call this an impersonal or “no-self” construal of the Trinity. This view refuses to incorporate a notion of a self into the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, on this view, there is in the Trinity neither one nor three of that which is capable of I-Thou encounter. Second, we might construe *both* the one God *and* the three persons as selves. When consistent and clear, this approach must modify the doctrine of the Trinity to permit both the one God and the three persons to be selves. The simplest, consistent, coherent, and biblical modification is to construe “God to be identical to one and only one divine self, the Father.”¹¹ This view, which Tuggy calls “unitarianism,” comes in several varieties. For simplicity, in dialogue with

¹¹ Tuggy, “Trinity,” Supplemental Document, “Unitarianism.”

Trinitarianism, we construe unitarianism as the doctrine that there are three divine persons who are selves, only one of whom is the one God.

Faced with these four options, some may object that we should not press for conceptual clarity and consistency in these matters. Tuggy labels theologies that, for one reason or another, resist conceptual clarity and consistency as mysterianism.

“Mysterianism is a meta-theory of the Trinity, that is, a theory about trinitarian theories, to the effect that an acceptable Trinity theory must, given our present epistemic limitations, to some degree lack understandable content.”¹² By “understandable content,” Tuggy means language about the Trinity that forms clear and logically consistent propositions. Mysterianism prefers notions of the Trinity that are either *unclear* or *inconsistent*.

Tuggy classifies characteristically *unclear* notions of the Trinity as “negative mysterianism,” on which “the true doctrine of the Trinity is not understandable because it is too poor in intelligible content for it to positively seem either consistent or inconsistent to us.” By “unclear,” we mean language that is imprecise or vague. For instance, the statement that “God is like a self” is less clear than the statement that “God is a self.” Due to being unclear, negative mysterian language about the Trinity is not held to standards of logical consistency. Negative mysterian notions of the Trinity are non-literal, lacking conceptual clarity. Instead, a number of “incongruous analogies” express a “minimal content of the doctrine.” These analogies and their minimal content shape unclear, albeit not fully ambiguous, standards that govern one’s use of “approved trinitarian sentences.”¹³

¹² Tuggy, “Trinity,” sec. 3, “Mysterianism.”

¹³ Ibid., sec. 3.1, “Negative Mysterianism.”

Negative mysterians, for whatever reason, do not fully understand their own sentences about the Trinity. They must have some minimal understanding, however, lest their sentences lack all meaning. Yet their language is sufficiently unclear to avoid asserting contradictory propositions.

In contrast, Tuggy classifies characteristically *inconsistent* notions of the Trinity as “positive mysterianism,” on which “the trinitarian doctrine can’t be understood because of an abundance of content. That is, the doctrine seems to contain explicit or implicit contradictions.”¹⁴ By contradictions, we mean language that expresses logically incompatible propositions. For instance, language about the Trinity asserting both that “it is true that God is a self” and that “it is not true the God is a self” is inconsistent or contradictory language. Positive mysterians deny that apparent inconsistencies are fatal for a doctrine of the Trinity (some even allow for actual inconsistencies). A positive mysterian notion of the Trinity will accommodate mutually exclusive elements, claiming that these elements are clear enough to be contradictory yet are still worthy of simultaneous acceptance. Put another way, while negative mysterianism may involve contrasting metaphors for the Trinity that are not clear enough to contradict, positive mysterianism incorporates logically incompatible propositions about God into a single inconsistent notion.

On this taxonomy, the New Testament offers an explicitly unitarian account of the Trinity when pressed for clarity, because the one God of the New Testament is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the very same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

¹⁴ Tuggy, “Trinity,” sec. 3.2, “Positive Mysterianism.”

Orthodox and modern theologies are generally explicitly Trinitarian, because they construe the one God as the tripersonal Trinity rather than as the single person of the Father. Furthermore, explicitly one-self, three-self, and positive mysterian accounts of the Trinity tend to be modern phenomena. Orthodox Trinitarianism embraces negative mysterianism, lacking the clarity needed for actual logical contradiction. No-self Trinitarianism is available to those who think that nothing in the Trinity is capable of I-Thou encounter, or who wish to define “self” apart from I-Thou encounter.

Mystery and Cognitive Idolatry

Given this taxonomy and Moser’s account of God’s purposes in being known, when, if ever, should we resist clarity or consistency in an account of the Trinity? We begin by assessing positive mysterianism, that is, clear yet inconsistent language about the Trinity. On the intentional meaning feature of Moser’s philosophy, a sentence is *analytically* true for a person when it is true in virtue of what that person means by the components of the sentence. A person’s interpretive commitments toward various terms determine what is analytically true for them. We may therefore, following Martin Heineken, express the law of non-contradiction in terms of interpretive commitments. “To say that a proposition is true,” he writes, “is simply to say that its contradictory is false and to say that a proposition is false is to assert that its contradictory is true.”¹⁵ As such, questions like “Is the one God a self?” and “are the persons of the Trinity selves?” call for yes or no answers. Given what these questions and their possible answers mean for us, we

¹⁵ Martin J. Heineken, *The Moment Before God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), 38.

cannot answer both yes and no. Yet positive mysterians boldly affirm yes and no, unfazed by inconsistency. They recommend believing logically contradictory statements about the Trinity. Their approach, however, destroys the meaning of Trinitarian language. Those who assert that a proposition is both true and false render their notions of truth and falsehood nearly meaningless.

For Moser's part, "the claim that a proposition is true means simply that things are as they are stated to be by that proposition."¹⁶ Inconsistent propositions about the Trinity cannot all be true because things cannot both *be* and *not be* as stated a proposition. "A literal contradiction is not only false, but also necessarily false."¹⁷ Neither can inconsistent accounts serve as best explanations of our experience.¹⁸ On the evidential feature of Moser's philosophy, a proposition is justified only inasmuch as it better explains the evidence at hand than its available competitors do. Therefore, a conjunction of inconsistent propositions is only justifiable if it *better explains* the evidence in question than every available *consistent* explanation does. This cannot plausibly be the case. A person's experience either has or does not have certain features needing explanation. As such, the evidence never constrains inconsistency in an explanation. A better explanation will exclude the inconsistent elements since those elements are not constrained by the

¹⁶ Paul K. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy (1989; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁷ Paul K. Moser, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96.

¹⁸ The following reasoning is set out in Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, 147-150; cf. *Empirical Justification*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy 34 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 18.

evidence. The evidential feature of Moser's philosophy thus denies that inconsistent explanations are ever plausibly best available explanations of our experience.

Even so, contradictory language about the Trinity—perhaps an uncritical admixture of biblical unitarian language and orthodox Trinitarian language—can still serve a purpose. This leads us to assess negative mysterianism, that is, unclear language about the Trinity. On the intentional meaning feature of Moser's philosophy a contradictory sentence can lack a truth-value yet still have meaning. A person could use contradictory language much like the term "Behold!", that is, to draw attention to an undescribed fact.¹⁹ Meaning, Moser insists, simply requires having some minimal standards for interpretation. If a person interprets non-truth-valued language about the Trinity as naming or indicating an undescribed fact of experience, then such language has meaning for them. It may be, Heineken suggests, that a person "cannot grasp God as the object of his thought—he can only encounter him person to person."²⁰ A creed that sounds contradictory can be neither true nor false yet still serve for a person as "the testimony to the wonder of what they have experienced."²¹

Even so, mysterian language can distract from God's self-manifestation in two ways. First, when mysterious non-descriptive language about the Trinity becomes a ritual, and when that ritual distracts from direct acquaintance with God, mysterian language can

¹⁹ Heineken, *The Moment Before God*, 71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

become idolatrous.²² In such cases, mystertian language substitutes for the experience that it ought to name. The mystery as failure to describe can eclipse, for many, the undescribed experience. Failure to describe is no guarantee of possessing the undescribed experience. Such failure, when itself adored, distracts from God's purposes in being known.

Second, negative mystertian language implicitly treats our working notion of self as inapplicable to the Trinity. It obfuscates when asked whether the one God or divine persons are selves, arguing that selfhood, in our sense, is not the right category—perhaps because no human category truly describes God. However, given the intentional meaning feature of Moser's philosophy, our questions about the Trinity and selfhood are analytic and only permit "yes," "no," or "I don't know" responses. By treating our notion of selfhood as inapplicable to the Trinity, negative mystertianism falls into the "no" category and is analytically committed to a no-self account of the Trinity. No-self accounts of the Trinity, however, divert attention from I-Thou encounter with God, since they insist that neither the one God nor divine persons are beings capable of I-Thou encounter. This is a serious mistake, if God in fact seeks I-Thou fellowship with humans. Again, we may let experience decide.

Moser's concern to avoid cognitive idolatry by attending to God's self-manifestation in experience ought, therefore, to point us away from mystertianism. Within his philosophy neither positive nor negative mystertianism furnish a best available explanation of our experience of God's self-manifestation. Positive mystertianism offers inconsistent and therefore false accounts of the Trinity, which cannot best explain our

²² Paul K. Moser, *The God Relationship: Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), 242-243.

experience. Negative mysterianism treats the notion of self as inapplicable to the Trinity and ultimately obscures the I-Thou quality of divine self-manifestation. As Emil Brunner observes, the proper mystery of the Christian faith consists in personal knowledge of God, “His personal mystery.” Mysterianism offers, at best, a “pseudo-mystery” that serves purposes other than God’s purposes in being known.²³

The intellectual mystery of the Trinity becomes a cognitive idol when our lack of a clear and consistent explanation distracts from or obscures God’s self-manifestation in experience. Even so, it may be that our experience of I-Thou encounter does not identify a clear and consistent best explanation. In such cases, on the evidential feature of Moser’s philosophy, we ought to *withhold* judgment rather than adopt an inconsistent explanation or one that amounts to no-self Trinitarianism. We ought to acknowledge that, given the I-Thou quality of God’s self-manifestation, any true account of the Trinity must somehow incorporate our notion of self. Even so, if our evidence is ambiguous regarding whether a one-self, three-self, or unitarian account of the Trinity is true, we ought to remain *agnostic* between the three. Moser’s approach therefore leads to an evidential agnosticism, if necessary, rather than mysterianism. We avoid cognitive idolatry by attending to God’s self-manifestation in experience, even if that evidence does not indicate how we should reconcile selfhood and the Trinity.

²³ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon (1949; repr., London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 219, 226.

Jesus and the Spirit of God

Faced with a set of clear and consistent explanations, Paul Moser's accounts of both truth-seeking and God's purposes in being known require that we attend to that which requires explanation. That is, we must attend to our experience of the Spirit of God. Drawing mainly upon Moser's Gethsemane epistemology and concern for God's self-manifestation as the foundational evidence for theology, this section argues that our perspective-bound experience of God's Spirit relates to Jesus in two senses, both of which require clarification. First, we experience the Spirit of God as the Spirit poured out by the exalted Jesus that conveys his personal presence. Second, we experience the Spirit of God as the same Spirit that was at work in the man Jesus of Nazareth. We experience Jesus, then, as one who both *receives* and *pours out* the Spirit of God. This section, accordingly, relates our experience of the Spirit of God to both the exalted and the historical Jesus. It thereby clarifies the nature of the foundational evidence that, on Moser's approach, an account of the Trinity must explain.

The Exalted Jesus and the Spirit of God

Larry Hurtado suggests that "the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a christologically shaped statement of monotheism."²⁴ That is, the doctrine of the Trinity attempts to explain why Jesus became a co-recipient of the worship that early Christians might have regarded as exclusively due to his Father.²⁵ The earliest Christian explanation,

²⁴ Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology*, 47.

²⁵ J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 96-120, 374-376, argues that Jesus receives worship in the

Hurtado insists, was that God exalted Jesus. The New Testament depicts Jesus as, at least, a crucified man who God exalted by raising him from the dead and granting him authority over all things. As such, accounts of the Trinity ought not to confuse the exalted Jesus with the God who exalts him.

In what follows we will always speak of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus together, to distinguish Jesus from Lazarus. Our concern is with what God means by uniquely raising and exalting Jesus, rather than merely with what Lazarus and Jesus share in common. Our knowledge of Jesus differs from our knowledge of Lazarus insofar as Jesus has poured out the Spirit of God, whereas Lazarus has not.²⁶ As such, Moser criticizes attempts to justify belief in the resurrection of Jesus apart from “the role of *God’s intervening Spirit* in testifying to believers regarding the resurrection of Jesus.”²⁷ Although historical investigation has not ruled out the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, we have no knowledge of these events, taken together, unless they serve as part of a best available explanation of our experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus. The early Christian proclamation or *kerygma* that God has raised and exalted Jesus is merely a proposal until it explains a person’s experience of God’s Spirit.

Indeed, in the New Testament, the Christian experience of God’s Spirit may explain the early eruption of devotion to Jesus as God’s exalted one. Hurtado writes, “I do

Synoptic Gospels as the King of Israel might receive worship within Second Temple Judaism, that is, as God’s chosen human representative on earth.

²⁶ Likewise, “In the Old Testament we have no historic character with whom we are in daily personal relation still, and who is the greatest contemporary of every age.” Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1907), 276.

²⁷ Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (2008; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 189, emphasis original.

not think that the worship of Jesus arose by inference. Something more direct was required for such a momentous step to have been taken.”²⁸ This something else, Hurtado proposes, involved religious experiences “that generated the conviction that the one God had exalted Jesus to heavenly glory and now required Jesus to be given cultic reverence.”²⁹ This lends biblical and historical precedent to Moser’s pneumatic approach to knowledge of God.

How then does the New Testament relate the exalted Jesus to the Spirit of God? Hurtado observes that the Spirit of God in the Old Testament is “manifested as a special power from ‘God’ given to individuals to enable them for particular tasks or roles.”³⁰ In the New Testament, God’s Spirit is never confused with a human spirit but is rather “a power that originates in ‘God’ and is given to humans.”³¹ As a man, Jesus receives the Spirit of God as a gift. The *Holy Spirit* that he receives as a gift is distinct from the *human spirit* that he commits into his Father’s hands as a sacrifice. The latter is obedient to the former. Having been obedient unto death, “Jesus shares in God’s role in sending and conveying the divine Spirit.”³² The Spirit of God becomes, after the exaltation, the Spirit of Jesus. “The basic import of the phrasing here,” Hurtado writes, “is clearly that the divine Spirit also somehow represents and conveys the presence of Jesus to believers, making them thereby vividly aware of their own filial status and that it is patterned after

²⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), xx.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁰ Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology*, 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 88.

that of Jesus.”³³ In the New Testament, then, the Spirit of God now conveys the personal presence of the exalted Jesus. Indeed, the Spirit of God now bears a “double identity as agent and mode of the presence and activity of ‘God’ and serving in very similar ways also on behalf of the risen Jesus.”³⁴

We see then that the New Testament interprets Jesus as one raised and exalted by God, who is personally present to his followers by the Spirit of God that he both receives and pours out. This much comports with Moser’s account of divine self-manifestation as an I-Thou encounter by God’s Spirit. The Thou in question is the exalted Jesus made present to his followers by the Spirit of God. On Moser’s pneumatic theological method, then, an account of the Trinity must explain the foundational evidence of the ongoing Christian experience of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the exalted Jesus.

The Historical Jesus and the Spirit of God

Paul Moser observes that the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit is distinct from “obscure mysticism” on account of the Spirit of God being the Spirit of Jesus.³⁵ Accordingly, to test our experience and see if it is from God, we must compare it to Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, we must compare it to his experience of and response to God’s Spirit, as far as we can discern the two. God’s exaltation of this crucified man ought to spur reflection. What would God mean by exalting Jesus? One family of explanations suggests that God exalted Jesus because Jesus was in some sense divine. Another suggests that God

³³ Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology*, 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁵ Moser, *The God Relationship*, 287.

exalted Jesus because God was pleased with his obedience unto death as God's Spirit-empowered human agent. Although compatible, the first approach easily obscures the second. Some writers argue that the New Testament depicts Jesus as doing and saying things that Jewish monotheism permitted only of God.³⁶ This approach, however, neglects textual evidence that Jewish monotheism envisaged duly authorized human agents of God exercising God's sole prerogatives upon the earth.³⁷ On this latter view, when Jesus does what only God can do (apart from perhaps pre-existing or creating the world) he shows himself to be God's authorized human agent. Furthermore, any deed that Jesus delegates or commands of his disciples (including walking on water) is not, in fact, something that only God can do, but rather something that any suitably empowered and obedient human agent of God could do. As such, to understand his exaltation and our experience of God's Spirit, we must reflect upon Jesus as a human agent of God empowered by the Spirit of God.

How then do we discern the Spirit of God in the man Jesus within Moser's framework for inquiry? As D.M. Baillie writes, "a good deal of confusion would be averted if we reminded ourselves that the phrase, 'the Jesus of history', means simply and precisely: 'Jesus as He really was in His life on earth', which includes of course what He did and said, what He intended and what He taught."³⁸ The problem of the historical Jesus arises once an inquirer realizes that the biblical records about Jesus resist easy synthesis into a single portrait. On Moser's evidential feature, an account of the historical Jesus

³⁶ For example, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

³⁷ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 48.

³⁸ D. M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 47.

must explain why the records we actually have are what they are, and those records themselves include distinct portraits of Jesus. Inevitably, inquiry about the historical Jesus is sensitive to the purposes of the inquirer. Albert Schweitzer observes as much. “There is no historical task,” he writes, “which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus. The stronger the love, or the stronger the hate, the more life-like the figure which is produced. For hate as well as love can write a Life of Jesus, and the greatest of them are written with hate.”³⁹ Jesus is nothing if not a polarizing figure. His interpreters are perpetually divided. This much is consistent with Moser’s account of inquiry as both perspective-bound and sensitive to the will of the inquirer.

Schweitzer’s own portrait of the historical Jesus is both controversial and enduring. It also suits our purpose of illustrating how we might perceive the Spirit of God at work in the historical Jesus. Schweitzer likens modern interpreters and the historical Jesus to Jacob and the unknown man with whom he wrestled at Peniel (Gen 32:22-32). Although modern inquirers demand a blessing, “He will not cross the ford with us. Jesus of Nazareth will not suffer Himself to be modernised. As an historic figure He refuses to be detached from His own time. He has no answer for the question, ‘Tell us Thy name in our speech and for our day!’”⁴⁰ In this sense, of refusing to be named and controlled, like the one with whom Jacob wrestled, Schweitzer famously describes Jesus as he who “comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men

³⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede*, 2nd ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911), 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 310-311.

who knew Him not.”⁴¹ As with Moser’s account of God’s purposes in being known, the historical Jesus resists manipulation and is only known by his Spirit, as he becomes our Lord. “He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time.” Only those who respond “shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”⁴² In this way, Schweitzer illustrates how the Jesus of history is only known in what Moser calls “obedience mode.”

Schweitzer depicts Jesus as a man who fully embraced the eschatology of his people. Jesus does not modify or adjust “one or other of the parts of the eschatological machinery,” like a religious reformer, but rather strives to set “the whole machinery in motion by the application of an ethico-religious motive power.”⁴³ He does not respond to a historic crisis but rather sets out to cause one. The missionary discourse of Matthew 10 is crucial for Schweitzer’s account. Jesus sends out the disciples on their mission to Israel expecting the end of the age prior to their return. As they go, he both warns them of the suffering they will face and promises that the Spirit of God will be poured out upon them prior to the impending cataclysm. To his surprise they return unharmed. “When, in accordance with His commission, by sending forth the disciples with their message, he hurled the fire-brand which should kindle the fiery trials of the Last Time, the flame went out.”⁴⁴ Surprised by this and other events, Jesus reinterprets his then secret eschatological role as the Messiah. God would require him to suffer for others that the end might come.

⁴¹ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 401.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 255.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 387.

The eschatological suffering that Jesus had anticipated for *all* his followers becomes *his* unique task. He sets out for Jerusalem to fulfill it, in obedience to his God and Father. This is what Schweitzer means when he famously writes that Jesus “lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him.”⁴⁵

The main weakness of Schweitzer’s portrait consists in his insistence that Jesus embraced the eschatology of his people wholesale and regarded the kingdom of God as not yet present but only to come.⁴⁶ As with the law, we can grant that the historical Jesus came to fulfill rather than destroy the eschatology of his people. Yet he could no more have embraced it wholesale than he could have been a strict Pharisee toward the law. Jesus was a fiercely independent *interpreter* of his Jewish conceptual heritage and, as David Forrest writes, “He reserves to Himself the title of pronouncing what their essential meaning is, of translating them from the imperfection of the letter into the fulness of the divine intention.”⁴⁷ Schweitzer shows that, as a human language user and interpreter, the historical Jesus is not exempt from the intentional meaning feature of Moser’s philosophy or the human cognitive predicament. Even so, the purposes of Jesus ultimately govern and transform his received notions and interpretive commitments. These purposes, in turn, are shaped by his fellowship with God by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the enduring strength of

⁴⁵ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 369.

⁴⁶ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, vol. 2 of *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon (1952; repr., London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), 260-263.

⁴⁷ David W. Forrest, *The Christ of History and of Experience*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), 46.

Schweitzer's portrait consists in how Jesus, a man steeped in Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, was obedient to God unto death, embracing self-sacrifice as his vocation from God despite his initial eschatological expectations. On Moser's approach, illustrated here by Schweitzer, we can treat Jesus as our cognitive exemplar concerning *human* knowledge of God, even when such knowledge requires reinterpreting traditional views.⁴⁸

Schweitzer observes that, historically and politically speaking, Jesus and John the Baptist begin their eschatological apocalyptic campaign when "there is silence all around."⁴⁹ If so, what power spurred Jesus to act? It is a common error, Moser observes, to attribute the power of God's Spirit to human greatness. How can we discern whether Jesus acts on his own, as an agent of God, or as an agent of Satan? Suppose with Schweitzer that Jesus slowly discerned his vocation by trial and prayer, rather than all in advance. We can then appreciate the power at work in a man who, being convinced of his exalted role within Jewish eschatology, both reinterpreted and enacted that role in an utterly *self-sacrificial* manner. We err, then, when we attribute this power to the religious genius of Jesus. "To compare Him with the great intellectual leaders of mankind," David Forrest warns, "and then to assert that He would have excelled each in his own department, is to seek, as the Jews did, to honour Him with an earthly crown. It is not warranted by the records, and it obscures rather than reveals His true glory."⁵⁰ The true glory of the historical Jesus, rather, is the power of God at work in his person, the Holy Spirit rather than his human spirit. We

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Paul K. Moser, "Jesus on Knowledge of God," *Christian Scholar's Review* 28, no. 4 (1999): 594.

⁴⁹ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 368.

⁵⁰ Forrest, *The Christ of History and of Experience*, 106; cf. Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 52.

discern that the Spirit at work in Jesus is of God rather than of Satan. We discern this because the same power that compels Jesus to draw history to a close commands him to do so via self-sacrifice. Those familiar with God's self-manifestation in their own experience recognize this self-sacrificial imperative as given by the Spirit of a God worthy of worship.

In this way, Moser's ethics for inquiry bear on our discerning the Spirit of God at work in the historical Jesus. Our experience of God's Spirit, which depends on our cooperation, itself guides our inquiry about the historical Jesus. Only by sharing in a measure of his Spirit do we recognize, as H.R. Mackintosh does, that the "utter confidence of Jesus that in Him the Kingdom was present and actual, is rooted firmly in His filial consciousness of the Father's indwelling power. He knows that in His person all promises have been made good."⁵¹ The first fruits and guarantee of the eschatological kingdom were present to Jesus in his experience of God's Spirit, as they are to his followers today. To historical studies, however, the power at work in Jesus remains an enigma. As Moser's ethics for inquiry suggests, persons can only discern the Spirit of God at work in Jesus by receiving that same Spirit for themselves.

Jesus is then, for those with eyes to see, a man driven by the Spirit of God. He is neither an extraordinarily gifted human reformer nor a man who drives out demons by the power of Satan. He is, rather, God's climactic Spirit-empowered human agent. Those who welcome the Spirit of God, however imperfectly, recognize in their own experience that Jesus of Nazareth welcomed this same Spirit without limit. Given Moser's account of God's purposes in being known, then, a pneumatic account of the Trinity must explain our

⁵¹ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Immortality and the Future: The Christian Doctrine of Eternal Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), 46.

foundational evidence of a shared experience of God's Spirit with the historical Jesus.

This remains so even though his human experience of God's Spirit is qualitatively greater than ours on account of his perfect obedience.

To sum up, Paul Moser's theological approach suggests that the foundational evidence needed for an account of the Trinity involves a twofold Christian experience of God's Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus. On the one hand, we experience the Holy Spirit as that which conveys the personal presence of the exalted Jesus. On the other hand, we recognize that this same Holy Spirit also conveyed the personal presence of his God and Father to the historical Jesus. To Jesus, this Spirit is the Spirit of his Father; to us, the Spirit of Jesus. Such is the foundational evidence provided in experience by God's Spirit that, on Moser's theological approach, a pneumatic account of the Trinity must seek to explain. As F.W. Camfield observes, "We see the Son only in and through the Spirit, and therefore the Spirit becomes the true 'rationale' of the Trinity."⁵²

Conceptual Categories and the Spirit of Jesus

One problem remains before we broach the matter of, on Paul Moser's framework, which account of the Trinity furnishes a best explanation of our experience of God's Spirit. That is, when do our purpose-relative notions and interpretive commitments comport with God's purposes in being known? For instance, we have already dismissed no-self Trinitarianism as alien to our experience of God's self-manifestation as an I-Thou encounter and argued that agnosticism, if necessary, better suits God's purposes in being

⁵² F. W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit: An Essay in Barthian Theology* (London: Elliot Stock, 1933), 242-243.

known than mysterianism. This section argues that, given Moser's ethics for inquiry about God, even our best available notions and interpretive commitments can themselves become cognitive idols if we lack the experience that they are meant to explain.

Appropriating the Christian Proclamation

It is possible to exalt the historical preaching or *kerygma* about Jesus above the historical and exalted person of Jesus himself. In this way, categories that might otherwise comport with God's purposes in being known can fail to do so. How then does the historical *kerygma* relate to the historical Jesus? The historical *kerygma* is the early apostolic teaching about Jesus, an early general portrait and interpretation of the historical Jesus as one who God has raised and exalted.⁵³ It describes Jesus as one who both receives and pours out God's Spirit. Even so, this *kerygma* is an explanation and interpretation of Jesus as his early followers experienced him, that is, both as a historical man led by God's Spirit and as the exalted one who pours out that same Spirit. On the evidential feature of Moser's philosophy and Moser's account of divine self-manifestation, the foundational evidence consists of the experience *itself* rather than its explanation. As Emil Brunner writes, "It is not the *kerygma* about Jesus as the Christ that is the foundation of the Christian faith, it is Jesus the Christ Himself."⁵⁴

⁵³ For an early proponent of their being a unified New Testament *kerygma*, see Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society: An Essay in the Philosophy of Experimental Religion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), 140-142.

⁵⁴ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, vol. 3 of *Dogmatics*, trans. David Cairns and T. H. L. Parker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), 179-180. Brunner admits in a footnote that he neglects this theme in his prior book *The Mediator*.

The *kerygma* is an It, whereas Jesus is a Thou. The very structure of the New Testament attests to Jesus being himself greater than the message about him. As Brunner observes, the biblical witness about Jesus involves *both* narrative and doctrine. The narrative witness—which describes his life, words, movements, deeds, and suffering—is the primary witness.⁵⁵ “In fact the ‘accidental fact of history’, Jesus, who has caused offence to the philosophers of all times, is the centre of Christian faith, and not the ‘Christ idea’ that is championed against Him.”⁵⁶ The doctrinal witness to Jesus, in contrast, is an explanation or interpretation of the historical Jesus. Doctrine, as such, “does not find its ground and its goal in itself, *but is always a pointer to Him*, the historical Jesus, who through the Resurrection is the first born from the dead and our contemporary.”⁵⁷ God’s purposes in being known, according to the New Testament, involve inquirers receiving the Holy Spirit as poured out by God’s crucified, raised, and exalted Son. Conceptual correctness alone cannot achieve this purpose, even if it helps.

Yet the apostolic witness both describes and explains early Christian experience. As David Forrest writes, “the God in whom I believe has not begun to speak when I first hear His voice.” Rather, our knowledge of God is “mediated through other lives that shine with His glory.” Some followers of Jesus, past and present, “are more akin to Him than their brethren,” and by their lives they “reveal truths which the latter would never have

⁵⁵ This partially explains why Christianity tolerates, and indeed welcomes, four separate Gospels. Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 587.

⁵⁶ Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 181.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 182, emphasis original.

discovered for themselves, but which, when revealed, they can recognise and verify.”⁵⁸ As Moser argues, those who receive evidence of God’s character themselves become personifying evidence for others of God’s character.⁵⁹ Herein lies the essence of apostolic authority. Those who first received God’s Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus identify and explain this experience for future generations. Yet the apostolic experience of the Spirit of Jesus is also a modern experience. “To be united with Christ through the Holy *Spirit* means,” Emil Brunner writes, “to be *directly* united with Him. Here there is no difference between an ordinary Christian of our own day and an Apostle.”⁶⁰ On Moser’s epistemology, we cannot simply believe the Christian proclamation in virtue of receiving it from a reliable authority, such as the Bible or a critical historical study. We need the foundational evidence of God’s self-manifestation. Therefore, although apostolic categories can help explain Christian experience, they are distinct from that experience. As such, on Moser’s approach, even apostolic theological categories can become cognitive idols apart from an ethics for inquiry that seeks after God’s self-manifestation.

Translating the Christian Proclamation

As Paul Moser’s perspectival and purpose-relative account of inquiry makes clear, humans speak about God from various perspectives with various purposes. The early Christian preaching or *kerygma* about what God has done in Jesus therefore requires *translation* if preached in lands and ages beyond first century Judea. Translation, however,

⁵⁸ Forrest, *The Christ of History and of Experience*, 313-314.

⁵⁹ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 185-230.

⁶⁰ Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 32-33, emphasis original.

has its dangers. The first danger is refusal to translate, the second a loss of meaning in translation. As Peter Forsyth writes, “We must all preach *to* our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up the mirror to the time.”⁶¹

The problem that translators of the Christian *kerygma* face concerns discerning between content and form.⁶² This is the theological problem of mythology. Using Moser’s terminology, it is the problem of using new linguistic tokens to convey an old meaning, or discerning the critical portion of the meaning conveyed by old linguistic tokens. Different interpreters interpret their perspectival experiences using different symbols. They may even use precisely the same symbols yet interpret them differently. As such, symbols, like linguistic tokens, always require an interpretation. Different authors can have different interpretive commitments toward the same symbols, even toward the same words.

One approach to the problem of translation (or mythology) is to remove from the *kerygma* all the ancient symbols that modern people no longer interpret literally. This *subtractive* approach is unsatisfactory since it is akin to removing words from the dictionary because we now interpret those words differently than when they were first coined. This strategy would leave us with an inadequate and biased vocabulary. For instance, the New Testament *kerygma* uses vocabulary and symbolism supplied by the Old Testament. If we, for example, excise all non-literal Old Testament symbolism from our theological translation of the New Testament, then whatever modern symbolism remains

⁶¹ Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind*, 8, emphasis original.

⁶² Helmut Thielicke, *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, vol. 1 of *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1974; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 67.

in our vocabulary will now govern our translation of the *kerygma*. A better approach is to interpret the ancient symbols, “knowing that they are symbols, and knowing, at the same time, that we need symbols.”⁶³

Helmut Thielicke argues that “the Bible itself carries out a permanent act of demythicizing and that it does so in exemplary fashion.”⁶⁴ That is, the biblical authors *reinterpret* their terms and symbols in light of their experience of Jesus. As Thielicke puts it, “when the words enter the NT they are baptized; a new creation is made of them; the ‘old’ of their former content has passed away. Yet in spite of this surrender of identity as a new creation, their former existence continues as in baptism.”⁶⁵ To use Moser’s terminology, a word is baptized when a language user forms a new interpretive commitment toward it, perhaps using that word for a new purpose. Ancient context alone, then, does not govern the meaning of biblical notions and symbols. Mythological symbols can be and have been pressed into the service of the exalted Jesus, partly because of and partly despite their history of interpretation. Symbols mean to their authors what their authors interpret them to mean. Context shows us how “assimilation to the Gospel” has transformed a symbol’s meaning.⁶⁶ Yet purpose-relative interpretive commitments, rather than context, determine meaning.

To translate the ancient Christian *kerygma* we must therefore understand the interpretive commitments of those who first proclaimed it toward the symbols they used.

⁶³ Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 397.

⁶⁴ Thielicke, *Prolegomena*, 84.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

A translation must, to some extent, mean what they meant. Yet the distinction between content and form includes a distinction between two types of meaning. It is a distinction between the fruit of the Spirit and that which remains of their baptized symbols' former meanings. "A basic theological distinction is made," therefore, "when this boundary between myth and binding message is drawn."⁶⁷ When discerning between form and content, "the decision demanded of me is not one I can take alone."⁶⁸ It must be made in fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

Apart from such fellowship with the Spirit of Jesus, no inquirer has in fact aligned their purposes in inquiry with God's purposes in being known. Baptized apostolic symbols can become idols for those who use them outside of such fellowship. Like meat sacrificed to idols, Thieliicke suggests, apostolic symbols are a stumbling block to those who interpret them without the assistance of the Spirit of Jesus.⁶⁹ Their former meaning resurfaces. That which was made inert by the gospel returns as a power for evil. The success of translation, then, "depends on whether our listening to the text in faith maintains its power over the new formulation or whether the means revolt successfully and we thus have a reawakening of the ancient gods, i.e., remythologization."⁷⁰ Therefore, apart from fellowship with the Spirit of Jesus, even apostolic symbols that otherwise might have suited God's purposes in being known can revert to cognitive idols. Translation as interpretation therefore requires that a person appropriate the content of the Christian

⁶⁷ Thieliicke, *Prolegomena*, 104.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 100, 102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

proclamation through fellowship with the Spirit of Jesus. When we neglect the needed experience, God's purposes in being known no longer guide our interpretive commitments toward what would otherwise be our best available categories.

We have now seen that Paul Moser's framework for theological inquiry will require a doctrine of the Trinity to incorporate a notion of self to account for the I-Thou quality of divine self-manifestation. Accounts of the Trinity that strive to avoid clarity or consistency are either not amenable to truth-seeking or they amount to a denial that I-Thou encounter is somehow applicable between humans and the Trinity. As such, agnosticism about our analytic options is preferable to the mystic approach. Given Moser's insistence on divine self-manifestation as the foundational evidence for theology, we have seen that an account of the Trinity should best explain the Christian experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus. This twofold experience involves receiving the Holy Spirit as poured out by the exalted Jesus and also recognizing in the historical Jesus a human led by that same Spirit. Finally, given Moser's ethics for inquiry about God, even our best conceptual categories cannot infallibly ward off cognitive idolatry. This is because God's purposes in being known are frustrated when inquirers neglect, reject, obscure, or ignore God's self-manifestation, no matter what categories they happen to use. This doesn't mean that human categories never apply to God. Rather, correct categories alone are no substitute for I-Thou encounter.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

By way of conclusion, we now review the argument of chapters 1 to 4, offer a sketch of where Paul Moser's approach to theology may lead inquiry about the Trinity, and assess the benefits and difficulties associated with this approach with an eye to future research.

From General Inquiry to Inquiry about the Trinity

Chapter 1 introduces Paul Moser as a Christian philosopher who depicts the evidence for God as only available according to God's purposes in being known. Moser construes this evidence as God's self-manifestation in the experience of the inquirer. Such evidence is sensitive to whether human purposes in inquiry align with God's purposes in being known. He critiques natural theology and fideism for neglecting the role of the human will in inquiry about God. These approaches, he argues, neglect the evidence of God's self-manifestation in experience. Moser's critics, in turn, tend to defend natural theology as complementary to the human experience of God, criticize his account of religious experience as non-normative or unclear, or criticize Moser's foundational notion of God. Chapter 1 also observes that, unlike some of his critics, Moser makes little use of the doctrine of the Trinity in his writing even though he speaks often of Jesus, his Father, and the Holy Spirit. This thesis asks, How does Moser's distinct approach to knowledge of

God bear on theological inquiry about the Trinity? To address this question, chapters 2 to 4 move from general to specific, beginning with Moser's general epistemology, then examining this epistemology as he applies it to inquiry about God, and finally applying and extending this theological epistemology to inquiry about the Trinity.

Chapter 2 concludes that, on Moser's general account of inquiry, perspective-bound truth-seeking inquirers can do no better than seek the best available explanation of their perspectival nonpropositional experiences using concepts that vary according to their specific purposes in inquiry. So understood, the purposes and perspective of an inquirer bear heavily upon the fruit of their inquiry. When inquiry concerns a God of perfect love, who is worthy of our worship, Moser argues that God would have purposes in being known. These divine purposes govern both our foundational evidence and the categories that we should use to explain that evidence. Chapter 3 clarifies the nature of God's self-manifestation as the experience of I-Thou encounter with a God who seeks our fellowship and obedience. It also explores how inquirers can commit cognitive idolatry by seeking to know God apart from God's own purposes in being known. This includes ignoring, neglecting, obscuring, or misinterpreting God's call to fellowship and obedience. Moser insists that inquiry about God requires an ethics for inquiry so that inquirers inquire about God on God's terms. Chapter 3 concludes that, on Moser's account of theological inquiry, theological belief can only be justified for a person insofar as it explains God's self-manifestation in their own experience using notions and interpretive commitments that comport with God's redemptive purposes in being known. Theology as truth-seeking, then, should seek to explain the human experience of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 4 applies and extends Moser's account of theological inquiry to inquiry about the Trinity in particular. It argues that inquiry about the Trinity, guided by Moser's epistemology, must address the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit. On this pneumatic approach, an account of the Trinity is only justified for an inquirer in virtue of explaining their I-Thou encounter with the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus. Accounts of the Trinity that depict neither the one God nor the divine persons of the Trinity as selves, that is, as beings capable of I-Thou encounter, fail to meet this standard. Furthermore, the foundational evidence requiring explanation is the Christian experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus. This is a twofold experience of the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit that empowered the historical Jesus and also as the Spirit that this same Jesus, now exalted, pours out upon his followers. Finally, no construal of the Trinity, however correct it may be, serves God's purposes in being known if held apart from the Christian experience of God's Spirit that it ought to explain. This thesis concludes that, on Moser's approach to theological inquiry, belief that God is triune (variously construed) can only be justified for a person if that belief serves as a best available explanation of their twofold experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus, using categories that explain rather than distract from God's self-manifestation via I-Thou encounter.

The Trinity and Christian Experience in Outline

We now briefly consider where inquiry about the Trinity leads if it proceeds as described in chapter 4. The experience needing explanation involves I-Thou encounter by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, any account of the Trinity that refuses to incorporate some notion of selfhood (defined in terms of I-Thou encounter) cannot be a best available

explanation of I-Thou encounter. As discussed in chapter 4, the problem of incorporating selfhood into the Trinity is the problem of discerning whether a one-self, three-self, or unitarian account best explains Christian experience. Inconsistent accounts cannot provide a best explanation. Neither can unclear accounts, on which selfhood is treated as a mere metaphor, being strictly inapplicable to the Trinity. As such, if we cannot discern whether a one-self, three-self, or unitarian account is our best explanation of experience, we ought to remain agnostic rather than appeal to mystery. The question remains: Does our evidence, in fact, favour one of our three remaining options?

Suppose, as chapter 4 argues, that Christians experience an I-Thou encounter with another self by the Holy Spirit. Given the character of this experience, suppose that Christians take that other self to be the exalted Jesus who pours out the Holy Spirit as the means of manifesting his own presence to his followers. Second, suppose that Christian experience of this Spirit is analogous to the experience of the historical Jesus inasmuch as all those who receive the Holy Spirit (including the historical Jesus) receive the Spirit of another self. In the case of Jesus, the Holy Spirit conveys to him the personal presence and will of his Father. To the Christian, then, Jesus is *both* a co-recipient of the Holy Spirit *and* one whose personal presence that Spirit conveys.

This twofold Christian experience of the Holy Spirit is inexplicable apart from construing Jesus and his Father as two selves. Indeed, unless Jesus and his Father are two selves, they have no I-Thou fellowship. This much follows analytically from construing selfhood as being capable of I-Thou relationship and distinguishing the I-Thou relationship from the reflexive I-I relation. If Christians encounter the historical Jesus as the human exemplar of I-Thou fellowship with God, then this is only possible provided that Jesus and

his Father are two selves. Even so, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus are indistinguishable in Christian experience. Christians experience the personal presence of Jesus as indistinguishable from the personal presence of his Father, even though Jesus and his Father are two selves who experience the personal presence of one another. Both features of this twofold Christian experience are explained at once if Jesus is one self capable of conveying the personal presence of another self, namely, that of his Father.

This proposed explanation of Christian experience rules out one-self Trinitarianism. Although one-self accounts explain why the personal presence of Jesus is indistinguishable from that of his Father, they cannot explain how Jesus receives the Spirit of God as the Spirit of another self. Only three-self and unitarian accounts of the Trinity can explain how Jesus and his Father are capable of mutual I-Thou encounter. The crucial difference between these remaining two accounts is whether (1) the Trinity is the one God or (2) the Father is the one God. Put another way, the crucial question is whether or not the one God is a self, since the Trinity is not a self on either remaining view.

Biblical language is unitarian inasmuch as it makes the one God a self, namely the Father, rather than a group of selves, even if it makes the Son and Spirit divine. That other selves, like human judges, are occasionally called God does not change the fact that the one God or true God is always named Father.¹ As Samuel Clarke observes, “Whenever the Word, God, is mentioned in Scripture, with any High Epithet, Title, or Attributed annex’d to is; it generally (if not always) means the *Person* of the *Father*.”² Even so, it may be that

¹ John 10:22-39 depicts Jesus reasoning along these lines.

² Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (St. Paul’s Church-Yard, London: Printed for James Knapton, 1712), 265, emphasis original; spelling and capitalization have been modernized.

the Bible does not offer the best explanation of the experience it describes. “To be described at first by inadequate conceptions,” H.R. Mackintosh observes, “has been the lot of most great things.”³ Mere appeal to biblical language, then, cannot decide the matter.

We may instead sketch the choice between three-self and unitarian accounts in terms of conceptual commitments regarding divinity.⁴ Neither option construes “being the one God” as necessary for divinity. Three-self accounts depict *no* single divine person as the one God. Unitarian accounts, in contrast, can include a divine Son and Spirit alongside the one God. Therefore, the difference between the two views amounts to whether we may depict one *particular* divine person as the one God—yes or no. Three-self Trinitarians answer no, being conceptually committed to the *uniformity* of divinity in the sense that no two selves are divine if one and not the other is the one God. Unitarians, in contrast, answer yes and are conceptually committed to the one God being a self and selfhood being essential for divinity.

Herein lies a tough choice for three-self Trinitarians. Since the one God of three-self Trinitarianism is not a self, then either divinity does not require selfhood or the one God is not divine.⁵ If we require that the word “divine” applies to the one God, then the three-self view makes capacity for I-Thou encounter superfluous or non-essential to divinity. This clarifies the decision between three-self Trinitarianism and unitarianism.

³ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, “The Unio Mystica as a Theological Conception,” in *Some Aspects of Christian Belief* (New York: George H. Doran, 1923), 101.

⁴ For a comparison of these two accounts, see Dale Tuggy, “Divine Deception and Monotheism,” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2014): 186–209, <http://journalofanalytictheology.com/jat/index.php/jat/article/view/jat.2014-1.030004192024a/232>.

⁵ For a similar argument, see Dale Tuggy, “The Unfinished Business of Trinitarian Theorizing,” *Religious Studies* 39, no. 2 (2003): 165–183.

Either divinity is uniformity—in that no one divine person among others can be the one God—or divinity requires a capacity for I-Thou encounter. Given that both views depict Jesus and his Father as two selves, which account best explains why the Spirit of God is indistinguishable from the Spirit of Jesus in Christian experience?

This choice is a matter of judgment. Yet it seems that the Trinitarian impersonal notion of divinity fails to explain how Jesus can, as one self, convey the personal presence of his divine Father, another self. That which Jesus conveys is precisely the personal character of his Father, and not the features of an impersonal divinity. Perhaps the biblical notion of humans, and particularly Jesus, as divine image bearers could be cast in terms of capacity for I-Thou encounter. To become Christlike, then, is to become a human who, like Christ, conveys the personal presence of Jesus and his Father as a Spirit empowered agent. In contrast to the three-self view, a unitarian personal yet nonuniform notion of divinity can explain both why Jesus conveys the personal presence of his Father and why the converse is never true. As such, on this rough sketch, it seems that a unitarian account of the Trinity, on which the one God is the Father, best explains Christian experience of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Jesus. That Paul Moser prefers New Testament language about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit might itself be partly explained by the fact that his theological method leads us to this conclusion.

Of course, different inquirers may weigh the evidence differently and more detailed work is needed to develop the doctrine of the Trinity along these lines. Such efforts must address the traditional two-natures Christology, on which a one-self Trinitarian might argue that Jesus enjoys I-Thou fellowship with his Father *only as a human* but not as divine. Of particular interest for Moser's Gethsemane epistemology would be the question

of monotheletism, that is, whether Jesus Christ has one or two wills. A good first question on our framework would be to ask whether Jesus is one self or two selves.

The Benefits and Challenges of a Pneumatic Approach

What does theology stand to gain or lose by adopting Paul Moser's account of theological inquiry, even apart from inquiry about the Trinity? Beginning with Moser's general epistemology, Moser's perspectival feature allows theology to reckon fairly with the human cognitive predicament in a way that values the questions of skeptics without being overcome by them. There are some battles with skeptics that theology cannot win and ought not to fight. Moser's perspectival feature allows theologians to concede what they must and direct their efforts accordingly. Of course, a theology accustomed to dismissing skeptical concerns via appeal to allegedly reliable (or perhaps infallible) sources of truth may treat Moser's perspectival feature as a threat. Yet shrewd skeptical questions remain until theologians render skeptics their due. A perspectival theology guided by Moser's epistemology can weather the skeptical storms that undermine allegedly objective theologies.

Moser's intentional meaning feature gives perspectival theology a firm place to stand by identifying human concepts and linguistic meaning as irreducibly purpose-relative. Theologians need not be alarmed that other inquirers, whether skeptics or other theologians, have different purposes in inquiry. They can simply acknowledge that their own purposes in inquiry differ from those of others and proceed accordingly. In this way, Moser can explain why theology, like philosophy, is subject to conceptual diversity. Different purposes lead to different conceptual frameworks and interpretations, even when

linguistic tokens or words are shared in common. Moser's notion of analyticity is particularly useful for theologians who wish to distinguish between substantive and semantic disagreement. To challenge analytic statements or frameworks, theologians must address the purposes that, via interpretive commitments, control the meaning of the words, rather than merely object to the words themselves.

Moser's evidential feature directs truth-seeking theology toward seeking and explaining evidence, rather than merely building a coherent system or transmitting orthodoxy. Not all theology seeks the truth. When it does, however, Moser insists that it seek some adequate indication that a proposition is true before accepting it. As a principle for truth-seeking, this seems above reproach.⁶ There may, however, be pragmatic purposes for theology other than truth-seeking. For instance, as Moser appreciates, mere truth-seeking in theology can delay or obscure the Christian message. As Peter Forsyth writes, "You must deliver that message while the critics are still at war."⁷ Furthermore, it may be that some people depend, for the moment, on tradition or some other allegedly reliable authority for their belief. Attacking these weak foundations in the name of truth-seeking will destroy the faith of some, and thus work against God's purposes in being known. "Religion without an experimental foundation in grace," Forsyth warns, "readily feels panic in the presence of criticism, and is apt to do wild and unjust things in its terror."⁸ Accordingly, the evidential feature of Moser's philosophy ought to point theology

⁶ Externalists regarding justification will disagree, allowing for justification without the knower possessing some indication of the truth.

⁷ Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1907), 280.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

toward the evidence that Moser himself highlights: God's self-manifestation in experience. Only those in living fellowship with God will be at liberty to hear criticism of various alleged authorities in theology.

Moser's notion of God as worthy of worship is perhaps the foundational feature of his account of theological inquiry. His expectations for God and God's self-manifestation follow analytically from this notion of God. This notion, in turn, depends on Moser's own purposes in inquiry. Unless we challenge those purposes, Moser's construal of God as worthy of worship remains above reproach as a semantic foundation. Accordingly, theologians who prefer to construe God primarily in terms of absolute power or absolute otherness are likewise free to do so. They will, however, form different expectations for God than Moser. We should let the evidence decide which construal bears itself out in Christian experience. Moser's foundational notion of God and associated framework of expectations stand or fall on their explanatory power over Christian experience, rather than agreement with the Bible, tradition, or any theological consensus.

Following Moser's example, theologians should reflect on how their own broad construals of God guide their subsequent findings and shape their own expectations for God. For instance, as Moser construes God, God would seek to restore humans to fellowship with God and other humans through an I-Thou encounter in experience. As chapter 3 discussed, some theologians may object that we ought not to depict God as entering into fellowship with humans via I-Thou encounter. Perhaps it seems inappropriate to regard both humans and God as selves, given the distinction between creature and creator. Or perhaps the selfhood of God or divine persons is a modern notion that theology ought to resist. In response to such concerns, we need only ask whether the objector

construes God as worthy of worship in Moser's sense. If not, then we are talking about different Gods and may simply put the dispute to a perspectival experimental test. That is, what features do we find in our own experience of God? Are those features better explained by an I-Thou encounter or by the lack thereof? Do we or do we not experience an alien will in conflict with our own that bears the marks of a God who is worthy of worship? If not, is there any moral reason on our part why a God worthy of worship eludes us at present? That is, are we compliant with an ethics of inquiry that positions us to encounter God in experience? There is no need to argue about semantics when we can simply put different notions of God to the test.

Moser's account of cognitive idolatry and his ethics for inquiry are of great service to theology, inasmuch as theologians are perpetually reflecting on the relation between theological inquiry and the life of the theologian. In virtue of his analytic expectations for a God who is worthy of worship, Moser shows how such a God would have purposes in being known that would include promoting *agapē* based *koinonia* relationships with God and between humans. Theologians should reflect upon whether their own work aligns with this purpose, or at least with the purposes of God as they construe God.

Moser's ethics for inquiry itself seems primarily directed toward enabling God to self-manifest in experience by welcoming God's own purposes in being known. These ethics do not focus directly upon whether an inquirer is *capable of understanding* Moser's explanation of Christian experience without sharing in that experience. Moser writes with sensitivity toward skeptical inquirers, providing them an analytic account of what God would do and leaving it to his readers to test for themselves whether this account bears out in experience. This procedure requires that skeptics understand what Moser means

without yet possessing the experience he seeks to explain. Some theologians may object that sin damages human reasoning and therefore that we should be skeptical about the analytic features of Moser's work. Yet skepticism toward the analytic, on Moser's epistemology, amounts to skepticism toward whether an author means what they say that they mean by the words they use. Instead, in light of Moser's intentional meaning feature, we should account for the role of sin in human analysis and reasoning by depicting sin as diverting human purposes in inquiry away from God's purposes in being known. This diversion results in notions and interpretive commitments ill-suited to explaining or even recognizing God's self-manifestation in experience. This thesis has attempted to illustrate how Moser's ethics for inquiry should also apply to analytic matters, in addition to Moser's emphasis on receiving evidence for God.

Concerning Moser's own writing about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, it is hard for Christian theologians to fault him for simply using New Testament language about God. Even so, given that he has written little about the Trinity, we refrain from speculating about his actual views. We can surmise, however, that Moser's concern for God's self-manifestation as the foundational evidence in theology should lead to a pneumatic account of the Trinity, that is, an account that seeks to best explain the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit. This approach treats Jesus as a living presence by the Holy Spirit, and interprets him in light of a twofold Christian experience of God's Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus. This approach does not depend on the reliability of the New Testament or of creedal Christian tradition but rather upon an experience needing explanation, including the experience of possessing the biblical texts that we do with the features that they have. Acknowledging conceptual diversity about the Trinity, this approach mediates between

approaches that promote biblical construals and approaches that promote orthodox or traditional construals. Rather than reconstructing either a biblical or a traditional account of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this approach asks which account of I-Thou encounter with the Father and Son by the Holy Spirit best explains a person's experience.

Given Moser's account of analyticity and God's purposes in being known via I-Thou encounter, inquiry about the Trinity need not succumb to perpetual mystery as lack of clarity or consistency in explanation. As Helmut Thielicke writes, "When controversy becomes purely quantitative: 'There is too strong or weak an emphasis,' or 'This goes too far or not far enough,' one can be certain that the basic issues are not clear."⁹ On Moser's approach, we can understand a set of analytic explanations without having the evidence needed to identify the best one. Theologians ought therefore to reflect on whether mystery or agnosticism is preferable toward certain questions. For simple analytic questions with clear and discrete options, appeal to mystery generates unnecessary confusion and obscures the fundamental issue at hand. Even so, Moser's work reminds us that the one thing needful is that we welcome the overtures of God's self-manifestation in experience rather than spurn them. Concepts, even when clear or correct, only serve God's purposes when used to explain that which we experience in reality, rather than in theory.

Future Directions for Paul Moser's Pneumatic Theology

To conclude, Paul Moser's account of theological inquiry is fruitful inasmuch as it directs inquiry toward God's self-manifestation and purposes in being known in a way that

⁹ Helmut Thielicke, *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, vol. 1 of *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1974; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 69.

fosters conceptual clarity whenever possible. Further research could apply Moser's approach to a number of theological topics, perhaps beginning with Christology and the person of Jesus. Beyond asking whether the person of Jesus is one self or two selves and the question of monotheletism, doctrines of Christ's prior existence and incarnation could be analyzed in terms of the experience they must explain. Moser's analytical method could clarify the options for Christology, moving it beyond perpetual variation of emphasis.

Even so, Moser's approach is also useful when dealing with metaphorical language since, on his account of meaning, language need not be truth-valued to have meaning. When meaning is vague, Moser's approach could be used to distill essential from extraneous interpretive commitments toward theological language and symbols. This would be important for any process of translating theology from the language of one time or place to another. More could be written about the ongoing theological project of demythologization with Moser's epistemology in hand. Indeed, biblical studies, with its concern for evidence and interpretive commitments, could benefit from attention to Moser's epistemology. Rather than despairing of discerning what an ancient author *really* meant, Moser's approach can guide hermeneutics and exegesis toward conclusions justified on account of their explanatory power over the features of the text. Context can serve as evidence for the interpretive commitments of the author, but authorial meaning depends on the author's own interpretation of their words.

Furthermore, Moser's approach to theology could be used to rank Christian doctrines according to their explanatory power over Christian experience.¹⁰ Doctrines that

¹⁰ For one such attempt, see Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind*, 128-129.

explain little may deserve less emphasis than doctrines that explain much. Put another way, some doctrines serve God's purposes in being known more than others when preached or studied. It may suit God's purposes in being known to leave humans without the evidence needed to answer certain questions. Doctrines associated with God's self-manifestation by God's Son and Spirit are therefore more important than those on which we should remain agnostic.

Moser's approach could also contribute to developing a political theology.

Although theology is governed by the purposes of theologians, these purposes in turn are judged against God's purposes in being known. From a liberation theology perspective, if God is concerned for the poor or downtrodden, then God's purposes in being known would include inquirers sharing in God's concern for the poor or downtrodden. In this sense, theology cannot be detached from the love of neighbour. Liberation theologies suggest that God sees the world from the perspective of the poor. If theologians seek to interpret the world from God's perspective, they would do well to see it from the perspective of the poor.¹¹ Similarly, Moser's approach could be used to develop a theology of money or political power. Indeed, any area where the human will guides human purposes in theological inquiry, Paul Moser's approach to theology is likely to bear fruit.

¹¹ For an argument along these lines, see Theodore W. Jennings Jr, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 47-69.

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